

Under Pressure by Katseester

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Summary:

In the early morning, Jonathan can hear the soaring chords of Queen cutting across the crescendo of Freddie Mercury's voice. There's a click; the music stops and the tape rewinds, repeating to the building guitar solo, muffled by the walls separating their rooms. Will hasn't been this happy in a while - a long while - and while Jonathan knows he has no idea what he's doing, what he does know is this: he's going to teach his little brother how to play the guitar.

What he wasn't expecting was Steve Harrington finding him in the damp basement hallway of their high school and lecturing him about sound acoustics or how the humidity was going to fuck up his strings.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

- For [Kypros](#).

Hi hello I watched the entirety of this show in a week and I'm pissed for what they did to all the characters in season 3 :)

BIG THANKS to [Kypros](#) who is my beta and is pretty much my co-writer at this point lmao

MARCH, 1985

It all starts on a Friday night.

Jonathan is late leaving work. He's late leaving work because Jenny asked him to close up so she could catch the 8:45 showing of *The Breakfast Club* with her boyfriend. He'd called his mom, and then the Wheelers, so it's fine. He doesn't really mind it; the gas station is usually dead by close so it's a pretty quiet affair, and Jonathan is usually out of there by five past the hour.

Still, his mom worries. So he made sure to call her. And then the Wheelers, because why not let Will know he has five extra minutes to chum it up with his pals? Sure, that's definitely the reason.

Nancy had answered the phone. She promised to pass along his message to his brother, and then there was a kind-of pause before she said, "well, bye," and hung up.

The drive to the Wheelers is uneventful. It's the same drive he's taken every Friday night since he landed this job: head to York, take a right on Desmond, and then a left onto Maple. Mrs. Wheeler answers the door, like she always does, and lets him in with the same bluster she always has. She leads him past the living room, where Ted is asleep in his Lazy Boy, to the basement door and then opens it, yelling down the stairs:

"Boys! Jonathan is here to pick Will up!"

A chorus of two, to the tune of disappointment, erupts from the basement.

“Just five more minutes!”

“We’re just getting to the good part!”

“Dude, can you believe - ”

“I know, isn’t it awesome?”

That last voice is Will’s. It’s loud, it’s boisterous, and it’s something Jonathan hasn’t heard much since before fall last year. He can see Karen gearing up to yell louder at the adolescents, so he raises his hand in what he hopes is a soothing gesture.

“It’s fine, five more minutes won’t kill, or anything.”

Karen levels him with a dubious look.

“Look, I’ll head down and make sure to drag Will up once whatever they’re doing is over,” Jonathan insists, and maybe it’s because he dated her daughter and they’re still friends or maybe it’s because he’s finally built himself up as a Responsible Member of Society or whatever, but Karen relents.

“Oh, alright. Be sure to holler when you leave, okay?” she says, crossing her arms.

Jonathan hops down the stairs. The rest of his brother’s friends have left by now, likely called home by curfew. Will and Mike are sitting in front of the old black and white T.V., enraptured by whatever program it is they’re watching. Jonathan takes a seat on the couch behind them and checks his watch for the time. 9:09.

It looks like the boys are watching MTV, if the gaudily-dressed musicians playing for a screaming crowd are any indication. Jonathan recognizes the distorted electric guitar riff as something from Queen - Killer-something? Ah, Killer Queen, they just said. Gunpowder, gelatine, dynamite with a laser beam. He doesn’t listen to Queen very much nowadays; he prefers their earlier stuff, and that never seems to play on the radio anymore. Still, he has a few of their

tapes in his glove box for whenever the mood strikes.

Killer Queen ends and Jonathan lets the next song in the set - Somebody to Love - to play in its entirety before he says, "Alright, time to go."

The concert isn't over, and Will makes sure to let him know how unhappy he is with this, but Jonathan only has to remind him that mom is expecting them before his brother rolls his eyes, shrugs, and goes upstairs without a fight.

Jonathan yells to Karen that they're leaving and hears a faint, "Drive safe!" from both her and Nancy upstairs in response. Ted snores on.

Will talks so much on the drive home that Jonathan's not sure how his lungs haven't exploded. When he finally pauses to take a breath, Jonathan asks,

"So, you like Queen, then?"

"I guess, yeah," Will says, but then looks out the window. "During one of the songs, Freddie came out wearing a dress. I thought it was kind of cool, but Mike said it made him look stupid."

Jonathan waits for Will to go on, but he doesn't. He recognizes the reticence in his younger brother, the hunch in his shoulders and the dip of his chin, and he hates that his brother's best friend made him feel like this.

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with that," Jonathan says, eyes on the road, and he sees Will turn towards him through his periphery. "Freddie Mercury is cool. If I were a famous rockstar, I'd wear a dress on stage too."

This evokes a surprised laugh from Will. "Really?" he asks, incredulous.

"Well, probably not," Jonathan admits, laughing a bit himself, "but Freddie is cool. I think it takes a lot of courage to be yourself. Don't you want to be like that?"

Will shakes his head. "Nah. I mean, sure, he's cool and all, but you know who was cooler?"

"Who?"

"Brian Mays," Will says, and Jonathan can hear the stars in his eyes through the wonder in his voice.

"Wouldn't it be just amazing if I could play like that? I mean, did you see what he did during Killer Queen? It was absolutely nuts!" And then he's off again, talking Jonathan's ear off until he pulls into their driveway.

"Hey," Jonathan says again, before Will can unbuckle his seatbelt and launch himself out of the car. "I have some old Queen tapes in the glovebox. You can have a few, if you want. I don't really listen to them all that much anymore."

"Are you sure?" Will asks, because even with how excited he is - his fingers are already playing with the glovebox's latch - he's never managed to shake the habit of double- and triple-checking before accepting any gift.

"Yup. Go ahead, pick a couple."

Thus assured, Will cracks open the glovebox and picks out exactly two tapes. Jonathan is probably going to have to tune it out in a couple of days, what with Will's habit to endlessly repeat any new song he likes until everyone in the house is sick of it, but it's worth it to see the way he clutches the tapes to his chest, like the most precious of cargo, as he unloads himself from the car and heads towards the house.

Jonathan follows, preparing to placate their mother for their lateness, but Joyce isn't angry when he closes the door behind him. Instead her mouth is pulled into something like a smile and something like hope is dawning in her eyes, staring after her youngest down the hallway long after he's shut the door to his bedroom.

"I haven't seen him that happy since Halloween," she remarks, and then turns her attention to Jonathan. "How was work?"

"It was fine," Jonathan answers, an autopilot response, and heads to the kitchen for something to eat, gears turning in his head until he comes to one conclusion: he's going to teach his little brother how to play guitar.

On Saturday morning he's woken up by the strains of You're My Best Friend filtering into his room from across the hall. His mom is already in her work uniform and is pinning her nametag to the front of her smock by the time he shuffles out of his room, and she gives him a *here we go again* look and a significant eyebrow wiggle before heading into the living room. Jonathan follows her and leans on the door jamb, yawning widely.

"Could you give Will a ride to Mike's on your way to work?" his mom asks, voice muffled by the couch cushions, and then she pulls back with a triumphant "a-ha!", keys dangling from one hand. "I'll pick him up on my way home tonight, I just - oh, dammit, I forgot about my tea!"

She runs to the kitchen where her tea is most likely very over-steeped. Jonathan calls out, "Yeah, I'll give him a ride," and then hears the wet *thwack* of the tea bag being tossed into the kitchen sink before his mother brushes past him towards the front door. "Thank you," she says, ruffling his hair on her way.

"Have a good day at work," Jonathan calls after her, and she turns briefly to smile at him before the door closes and all he's left with is the sound of You're My Best Friend's opening bars.

Jonathan starts on breakfast, yelling down the hall when it's nearly ready, and only then does Will's tape deck click off. Will meticulously crafts a sandwich out of his toast, margarine, and scrambled eggs, and then wolfs it down in about five seconds flat.

Jonathan isn't sure how to start this conversation, so he just starts it.

"I picked up guitar again," he says while Will is gulping down his orange juice. "I could teach you a thing or two, if you want."

Will's eyes are huge behind his cup of juice. "Really?" he asks, but

then he frowns. "I never hear you play at home, though."

"Yeah, because you're always blasting music across the hall. I can't concentrate," Jonathan jibes, words lacking malice, and Will rolls his eyes before bringing his dishes over to the sink. He makes a disgusted noise at the soggy tea bag currently occupying the area. "So what do you think? I'm not as good as Brian Mays, but..."

"When can we start?" Will asks, surprising Jonathan with his enthusiasm. He sits back at the table while Jonathan finishes his breakfast, chin in hand.

"Well, I'm a little rusty," Jonathan admits. "Give me a week."

"Awesome," Will says.

Saturday afternoon finds Jonathan at the local thrift store after work. Jeremy doesn't even look up when he enters; Jonathan probably frequents the place more often than he does. He knows what he's looking for, and finds it almost immediately: a beat-up old guitar that's lost all its varnish, and advertised as being a steal for the low, low price of \$8.95, case included. It has all the strings and from what he can see none of the wood is cracked, so Jonathan unhooks it from where it's hanging on the wall and brings it up to the counter.

"You're gonna need a strap," Jeremy mumbles around the cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Excuse me?"

"A strap. A guitar strap. Unless you wanna drop the damn thing."

"Okay," Jonathan says. "Do you have any guitar straps right now?"

Jeremy shrugs. "Don't think so."

"Okay," Jonathan says, and pays for the guitar.

"You know how to play that?" Jeremy asks.

"Sure," Jonathan answers. "Been playing all my life."

He leaves the thrift store to the sound of Jeremy's disbelieving laughter.

Redfield's Music Emporium is closing down. Jonathan has never been inside; the shiny interior always seemed so foreign and untouchable for someone like him, like if he stepped through the doorway everyone would turn and look at him and know he didn't belong there, with all the expensive instruments and equipment. But Starcourt opened with a music store, and Redfield's isn't the first local business to fall victim to the mall.

There's something now that stops him from getting out of his car, a feeling of unease in his gut that's all too familiar to him. It's a messy cocktail of fear and shame and anxiety, one that spills over into an unfounded premonition of failure, because he can't ever not remind himself about how all of his plans in the past have been stupid, how they never worked out, and how they always ended with the same gut-punch of disappointment.

How every time he tried to make Will happy with something new and something exciting, something like watercolour painting or amateur birdwatching, Lonnie would always spit out that hateful word under his breath - "coupla queers," he would say, and he would make sure not to slur no matter how shitfaced he was, because Will didn't want to go shoot guns at animals or beat the shit out of other kids in sports. And Jonathan didn't mind the insults - or rather, he had gotten very good at ignoring them - but then that curious and excited light would dim in Will's eyes, and Jonathan always hated that the most of all.

Turns out watercolour supplies are expensive. Turns out Will's classmates thought birdwatching is for fags. And Lonnie got the satisfaction of watching his sons, too sensitive and too feminine and too much like their mother, fail one more time.

But Lonnie isn't here anymore.

Lonnie isn't here anymore, and Will's eyes shone under the streetlight when they drove home, and the timbre and cadence of his voice held so much barely-suppressed excitement as he gestured wildly with his

hands that Jonathan thought his brother might actually be okay again soon.

Jonathan is sitting in his car outside of Redfield's, staring up at the giant red and white CLOSING SALE - EVERYTHING MUST GO banner strung up along the exterior of the building. He's not sure what he's doing - actually, scratch that. He has absolutely no idea what he's doing, but he's going to buy his little brother a guitar and teach him how to play.

The inside of Redfield's is just as shiny as it looks from the outside, and it doesn't take long before the lone salesperson takes pity on him and asks if he needs any help.

"Uh, yeah, actually," he says, ignoring the way the back of his neck is prickling with discomfort. "I'm looking to buy a guitar. And a couple straps."

All of the guitars are disgustingly expensive, even on clearance. Based on Will's height the sales clerk recommends one of the 3/4 size guitars, but Jonathan knows that Will isn't done growing. If his brother wants to keep playing - and he really, *really* hopes he'll want to keep playing - he'll need a bigger guitar and Jonathan can't afford to buy two. He picks out the least expensive full-size model, finds an inexpensive case for it, adds a couple of heavily discounted straps to his order, and when all is said and done Jonathan has almost no money left. He had done the math in his head the night before and he knows the electricity bill will be paid, so he tries not to let it sting too badly.

Contrary to what Jonathan had told Jeremy, he doesn't know a whole lot about playing a guitar. He took a semester of guitar class last year because it seemed like something nice and easy and stress-free after everything that had happened with Will's disappearance and the Upside Down. So he kind of knows how to tune a guitar; they'd used an old-fashioned tuning fork in class and then did this counting thing with the frets for rest of the pitches, but most of his class was seemingly tone-deaf and no one ever got it perfect.

Tuning a guitar is sort of where his knowledge ends. He knows a few chords - like the G-chord and the C-chord - and he can play maybe

one scale (guitar class really didn't go into very much detail about the whole "playing a guitar" thing, funnily enough), but unless he wants to teach Will the most boring, monotonous song in the world, he needs to figure something out.

The library is closing in about ten minutes by the time he arrives, and the librarian makes some comments about Will's overdue books that Jonathan largely ignores, but by five o'clock he has a few beginners' books on how to teach yourself to play and that's - well, it's a start. Will isn't going to magically pick up learning an instrument at the speed of light, they'll probably spend the first lesson going over the string names and how to properly hold the guitar anyway so there's no use fretting.

He has time. He hopes.

On Sunday Jonathan brings his books to work and begins to read them between customers. Jenny is on the pump today and she flips him off whenever he looks out at her, but she probably won't snitch.

The thing is, without a guitar in front of him or in his hands it's pretty hard to conceptualize what the book tells him. He ends up quitting in frustration halfway through his shift, and flips Jenny off in return the next time she gestures at him. This causes her to pump her fist triumphantly in the air.

He tries again after work, but before he can make any real progress Will comes home and Jonathan refuses to let his little brother know that he's actually awful, so he packs it up for the night.

If he has to practice during his lunch break at school, if that's the only time where he'll have some peace and quiet to concentrate, and nobody listening in to tell him how bad he is? Fine.

It's been two months and four days since Jonathan and Nancy broke up. Not that he's counting, except he is. Except it's not for the reasons most people would suspect. He doesn't still love Nancy - isn't sure that he ever really *loved* her - except that's a lie, he did love her, he *does* love her, just - just, not in the way that he should.

He thought he did. But then, he hooked up with her in Murray Bauman's bunker after the guy made some weird remarks, so. What does he know?

If there's anything he regrets in their relationship, it's that. Because without that, he and Nancy probably wouldn't have needed or wanted another push to be together from some outside force, and they probably would have stayed just friends. Their feelings probably would have fizzled out naturally over the next few months once they discovered they didn't have really much of anything in common aside from almost dying together a few times. And then maybe, just maybe, there wouldn't be this awkward air between them anymore whenever they tried to talk about anything deeper than the weather.

Or maybe Jonathan would still think that he was in love with her, and she would still think that she was in love with him, and they would have just delayed the inevitable. Who knows.

On New Year's Eve, 1984, Jonathan and Nancy shared a kiss at midnight. And when she pulled back, Jonathan could see it in her eyes. He could see that she knew, and he hoped she could see that he also knew. They didn't speak the words aloud - there was no, "I'm breaking up with you," or, "this isn't working." Nancy just stepped away from him and nodded, mouth pursed, and Jonathan found it difficult to look at her because if he couldn't love Nancy Wheeler, who the hell *could* he love?

When he left the Wheeler residence soon after that, Nancy said, "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for," Jonathan said, shaking his head, and he meant it. He hoped to god she could hear that he meant it.

They still eat lunch together. In silence, mostly, but sometimes they talk about the weather. Sometimes they talk about classes, and sometimes they talk about school events, and sometimes they even talk about movies or television shows. But usually it's the weather.

Today, they're talking about Will.

"I think it's great," Nancy says. She's idly scraping her plastic fork

back and forth across the cafeteria's mashed potatoes, making some pretty sharp ridges with the tines. "I know you've been worried about him since last October. Maybe this will help get his mind off of things."

"I hope so," Jonathan says. He's already finished eating, so he consolidates his trash into one pile in front of him. "I just hope I can be a good enough teacher so it doesn't all fall apart."

Nancy's fork pauses. "You're teaching him?" she asks, tilting her head in the way she does when she doesn't quite understand something. "I thought you were going to hire a teacher."

Jonathan can see how she would make that mistake. When he told her about it he'd said, "So I figure, why not teach him how to play." He hadn't mentioned himself, or a teacher. It's only natural Nancy would assume he meant the latter.

It still rankles. He hates that it does, knows that she doesn't mean anything by it, but it's just another reminder that she's in a completely different world from him, one where she doesn't have to worry about keeping a roof over her head before the age of eighteen.

"Yeah, I am," he says. "Teaching him, I mean. Nothing complicated, though. I just want him to be able to get a handle on things so he can start experimenting on his own."

Nancy nods, and her fork resumes its scraping. "It's a great idea," she says. Then something seems to occur to her. "Have you even touched a guitar since Bowman's class?"

Jonathan shrugs. "I'm going to need to practice," he says, and stands with his garbage, hoisting up the guitar case in his other hand.

"Right now?" Nancy asks, eyebrows flying towards her hairline.

"I'm on a time limit," Jonathan explains. "I'll see you in chem."

The most quiet and secluded place in Hawkins High during the lunch hour is the basement hallway by the boiler room. Jonathan discovered it in ninth grade, when he didn't have any friends to eat lunch with and got tired of the constant "freak" and "weirdo" jokes

pointed in his direction. It's kind of dark, kind of damp, and smells kind of weird, and no one except the janitorial staff ever goes down there.

He's not happy to discover Steve Harrington in his spot.

It's not that he dislikes Steve. Steve is fine, actually. Steve sometimes stops by his and Nancy's lunch table and joins them for a little while, and the conversation always gets a little more livelier for it. Jonathan would actually say that he likes Steve.

The thing is, kind of liking someone as a person doesn't automatically mean you're prepared to monumentally embarrass yourself in front of them, and Jonathan has had enough of embarrassing himself in front of Steve Harrington to last him a lifetime.

"What are you doing here?" Steve asks him. He's sitting cross-legged on the floor under one of the few lights, and Jonathan can see a cafeteria chicken burger sitting in his lap, and a chocolate milk carton at his side. He looks surprised to see Jonathan, which is fair. Jonathan is surprised to see him, too.

"Nothing," Jonathan automatically responds, and he considers trying to hide the bulky guitar case behind him but that would be kind of dumb, considering Steve has definitely already seen it. "What are you doing here?"

Steve quirks an eyebrow at him. "Eating," he says, and takes a bite out of his chicken burger. "S'that a guitar?" he asks through a mouthful of food, and points to the offending object. He swallows. "I didn't know you played."

"I don't," Jonathan says. "I mean, not really. I took Bowman's class last year."

Steve nods. "Guitar is pretty cool." He's finished his burger, and begins guzzling his milk.

"Yeah."

Steve finishes drinking his milk. He stands up, dusts himself off of any stray crumbs, and gives Jonathan a lopsided smile as he passes

by. “Well, see you.”

And just like that, Jonathan is alone. He checks his watch. He only has twenty minutes left.

Sighing, he sets himself up in the dark, damp, kind of smelly hallway, and tries his best to concentrate.

Jonathan is really, *really* bad at this. He doesn't get it. During Bowman's class he picked up on everything relatively quickly, so why is learning from a book so damn hard in comparison? Following the instructions and the grainy pictures in the books leaves him feeling like his fingers are gigantic sacks of uncooperative meat that get in each others' way whenever he needs to move them. And his crappy guitar keeps going out of tune in the damp hallway, so he has to waste precious lunch-hour time re-tuning it.

He's not in the mood for whoever it is whose shoes are slapping against the stairs, and is utterly unsurprised to see that it's Steve Harrington.

“Hey,” Steve says, and sits down across from him with his lunch. Today it's a turkey club with chocolate milk.

“Hey,” Jonathan says back.

Steve starts eating his lunch. Jonathan tries to ignore him and tries even harder to figure out how the hell he's supposed to switch from one chord to another without sounding like he's strangling a bunch of straws.

After a minute of frustrating failure, Steve puts down his sandwich and says, “your middle finger is extended a bit too far.”

“What?”

“Your middle finger, it's out a bit too far. It's making it difficult for the rest of your fingers to get around it. That's why it sounds like that,” Steve explains. “Try pulling it in a little bit and see how that feels when you change chords.”

Against his better judgment, Jonathan tries it. The chords sound cleanly through the dark hallway, and Jonathan gapes, first at his hands, and then at Steve.

“How did you know?” he asks. Steve shrugs and takes a swig of milk.

“I used to take lessons,” he says, nonchalant. “Finger placement used to trip me up too.”

Jonathan is finding it a little hard to process. Steve Harrington, King (or maybe now it's Former King) of Hawkins High, knows how to play guitar? And he didn't tell *anyone* ?

“Bullshit,” he voices, and Steve snorts.

“Here, pass it over,” Steve says, holding out a hand. Jonathan unloops the strap from around his neck and hands the guitar over.

Something happens, then. A change comes over Steve, a shift in his posture that turns him from the laidback, kind of goofy guy that Jonathan sort of knows to someone a bit more serious, a bit more focused.

And then Steve starts to play.

It's good. It's really good. The song he's playing isn't something Jonathan has ever heard before. It feels somehow softer, daintier, than the music Jonathan typically associates with a guitar. If he's being honest, he doesn't really like it - it sounds like something his brother would load up in the cassette player for one of his DnD sessions - but Steve plays it so well that he doesn't care about that. Jonathan just wants to keep watching him play.

Steve's fingers abruptly pause, and the music stops. He sits frozen for a moment, frown lines creasing his forehead, before dropping his hands and relaxing back into his previous position. “I don't remember the rest,” he admits sheepishly, and gives Jonathan his guitar back.

“What was that?” Jonathan asks.

“Uh,” Steve says, scratching at his jaw. “I think the guy's name was Dowland or something? Don't ask me the name of the song or

anything, though, because I definitely don't remember that."

Instead of looping the guitar strap around his neck and continuing to ignore Steve, Jonathan places the guitar on his lap. "So you took lessons?" he asks, and Steve looks at him with an expression oddly reminiscent of a deer right before it gets hit by a car.

"Yeah," Steve says. He finally looks away from Jonathan, picking at his sandwich. "Parents made me take 'em when I was a kid. They actually started me out on violin, but that was the lamest shit ever, so they let me switch over to guitar. I thought I would learn all these cool songs and be able to show it off to everyone at school. Instead I got to learn...that."

Jonathan can see why Steve never told anyone about it. Dowland, or whatever his name was, was decidedly uncool. Steve would have been laughed out of the building.

"It sounded really good," Jonathan says, and Steve gives him that lopsided smile again. Jonathan looks away.

"Thanks, man."

This time when Steve finishes his lunch, he doesn't leave. Jonathan resumes practicing, and Steve sometimes points out things he can change or do better, and they almost always work. It's almost a disappointment when the bell rings.

"Hey, uh," Steve says, while Jonathan is packing up his guitar. "So I ran into Nancy earlier and she mentioned you want to teach your brother how to play?" He phrases it like a question, tone lilting upwards near the end.

Jonathan clicks the locks on the case. "Yeah. He really likes Brian Mays. From Queen," he adds, in case Steve somehow doesn't know. Steve's eyes light up like a bundle of Christmas lights, though.

"Queen? Dude, I love Queen!" he enthuses, and then sings a horrible rendition of one of the chorus parts in Bohemian Rhapsody. Jonathan isn't quite sure what to make of it, but it sounds so bad in the damp, echoing hallway he can't help but laugh. "Anyway," Steve says, once

they've both stopped laughing, "Nancy was real concerned that you don't know how to play - please don't tell her I said that by the way, she would kill me - so I got to thinking."

Jonathan doesn't make the typical "haha, Steve Harrington, *thinking*?" joke, partly because it's needlessly mean, and mostly because it's just not true.

But Steve doesn't continue, just stands there biting his lip, face screwed up in a way that Jonathan recognizes but never expected to see on him. Steve Harrington, not knowing what to say? Haha, oh, that's a riot.

Jonathan starts to say, "Uh, the bell - " just as Steve says, "I can teach you."

There's a beat of silence.

"If you want," Steve adds. His lips are pulled back in a grimace, one hand mussing his already-messy hair.

"Um," Jonathan says.

"You don't have to if you don't want to, I just thought it might help," Steve rambles. "Nancy said you're on a time limit and I don't know what that time limit is but I could probably whip you into shape pretty quickly, and it's not like Will is going to pick the guitar up and know how to rock out immediately so, like, we got time and stuff."

"That would be - cool," Jonathan says, stilted. He's still waiting for the punchline.

"Cool!" Steve says almost immediately. "But, uh, this is kind of a shitty spot for learning guitar. No offense," he adds quickly. "It's just...really wet down here? Your guitar is going to go out of tune super fast and then it'll sound like shit no matter what you do."

Jonathan had noticed. "Where do you want to do it, then?" he asks. The tardy bell rings, and Steve acts like he doesn't hear it.

"My parents are never home," he suggests, nonchalant, but Jonathan can see through his unconcerned facade; Steve is absolutely jittering

with nerves. “And I still have a bunch of equipment. Music stands and all that, makes it easier to read.”

Jonathan nods. “Okay,” he says, “sounds good.”

Steve’s smile is almost blinding. “Cool,” he says, finally turning on his heel and heading towards the stairs. “See you after school?”

“Sure,” Jonathan calls after him.

Nancy gives him a quizzical look when he stumbles into chem ten minutes late, and even the walk of shame to the office for a late slip doesn’t dampen his spirits. He’s beginning to feel, for the first time since he had this idea, that it might all work out. He’s walking on cloud nine.

Notes for the Chapter:

Disclaimer: I have no idea how to actually play guitar but I do play piano so please go easy on me.

I'm taking creative license on Queen's setlist during their The Works tour. I Want to Break Free is no longer an encore song for plot purposes. :V

John Dowland was a composer during the Renaissance. I was thinking of [this piece](#) when I pictured Steve playing him.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

hhhhh as always HUGE THANKS to my beta [Kypros](#), without whom this probably would never get written.

Jonathan isn't sure what he expected to happen once the last bell of the day rings. It certainly isn't the sight of Steve Harrington lounging on the hood of his shitbox Ford.

"I know where your house is," Jonathan says, as though Steve doesn't already know that. They've been neighbours since elementary school.

"Yeah, uh, do you have jumper cables?" Steve asks. Jonathan does. "I think I mighta left my lights on this morning or something."

Steve's BMW won't start. Stubbornly refuses to, even with a little extra juice from Jonathan's engine.

"Piece of shit," Steve swears, kicking at one of the front tires.

Jonathan tries the ignition one more time, and to his immense surprise the vehicle sputters to life, engine turning over three or four times before it catches and smooths out into a rumble.

"Oh, *fuck* yeah!" Steve exclaims. He holds a hand out, palm facing Jonathan, and Jonathan gives him the high-five he wants. Jonathan climbs out of the driver's seat, leaving the engine running. He'd made that mistake before, turning the car off after it sparked back to life, and the battery had re-died almost immediately.

A few other students have stopped to watch, some pointing and laughing behind their hands, and Jonathan doesn't get why the hell helping someone with car troubles is so damn funny, so he flips them off, yells, "take a picture," and ignores the collective gasp that ripples throughout them. They scatter soon after.

Steve is impressed. "Dude, when did you get so - don't take this the wrong way, but that was actually kind of cool?"

Jonathan sort of shrugs as he leans into his Ford to turn off the engine. "Can you get those?" he says, gesturing with his head to the cables connected to the BMW's battery. "Opposite order to how we connected them. Make sure they don't touch anything until they're all unhooked." They successfully unhook their cars without electrocuting anything or anyone, and Steve passes his clamps over. Jonathan chucks the cables into his trunk, and then carefully closes his hood. Steve does the same, and then leans against the wheel well.

"None of that seems important anymore," Jonathan says, in answer to Steve's partially-asked question. "Those people and what they think of me? It doesn't matter. It never did. I guess now I just have the backbone to tell them to fuck off."

He can see by the way Steve is nodding his head that he understands, or at least sort of understands. It had taken the discovery of a parallel world full of monsters, his family almost dying a few times, and his mom's boyfriend *actually* dying, but Jonathan couldn't care less about what the general populace of Hawkins Goddamned High thinks of him. They've never had a good opinion of him. Who gives a shit what they think now? It's all so insignificant.

"What about you?" he asks in return, and Steve gives him another deer-in-headlights look. "Why were you eating lunch in that nasty hallway?"

It's Steve's turn to shrug. "My skin isn't as thick as yours, I guess," he says. "I was getting tired of all the jokes."

Jonathan can believe it. He hasn't been paying attention, not really, but it would be difficult *not* to notice Steve Harrington's supposed fall from grace from the darling, douchebag jock that everyone wanted to be friends with to the guy who can't beat Billy Hargrove in basketball and who sometimes hangs out with his ex-girlfriend and Jonathan Byers, certified freak, at lunchtime. It hasn't escaped Jonathan's notice that Steve hadn't submitted any applications for college or university, and it certainly hadn't escaped the notice of some of the meaner cliques in the school.

The other boy hasn't had the years of practice Jonathan has, ignoring the jibes and the snide remarks and open contempt.

"You get used to it," Jonathan says. "It sucks - trust me, I know - but those people don't know you or what you're like. They're the idiots, here."

Steve's mouth pulls up into that lopsided grin. It's magnetic, almost, and Jonathan can see how it would dazzle anyone he turned it on. He's almost dazzled, himself.

"Thanks," he says, and Jonathan almost doesn't hear it over the rumble of Steve's BMW.

"No problem," he replies, looking away before he says something stupid. "I think your battery should be good now."

This is where they run into another problem: Steve's car refuses to move.

"What the fuck," Steve groans, banging his head lightly against his steering wheel. "What - the - *fuck* . What the hell did you do to my car, Byers?!"

"I didn't do anything," Jonathan scowls. He's staring down at Steve's engine block. Everything under the hood *looks* fine. "Your transmission might've died."

Steve makes a displeased gurgling sound. Jonathan is sympathetic; of all the things to break in his car, a transmission repair is possibly one of the most expensive fixes.

They give up trying to make the car move after another fruitless fifteen minutes and skulk back into the school to use one of the office phones. Steve calls a tow and Jonathan, taking pity, gives him a ride to the mechanic instead of forcing him to sit with the admittedly sketchy-looking tow truck driver.

"Yer transmission's gone and croaked," the mechanic tells them. "Might be a week before we can get the part in. Might be two, since you got a fancy Beemer an' all. Gotta import everything."

"Fuck," Steve swears emphatically, and the mechanic guffaws.

"Won't be cheap either," the man says. "You got some shit luck,

here.”

Steve gives the mechanic his info and they leave his car in the lot. The ride to Steve’s is quiet; Steve has his forehead resting against the window, staring forlornly out at the grey, wet, March scenery, and Jonathan doesn’t have much to say.

Jonathan pulls into Steve’s empty driveway, and they just sit there for a minute, both unsure of how to proceed.

“You still wanna come in?” Steve finally asks, fiddling with the zipper on his jacket. “I know it’s getting late.”

It’s an out if Jonathan wants one; an easy decline, supplied by Steve himself.

Jonathan doesn’t really want an out. He wants to learn how to play guitar better, and he actually kind of likes hanging out with Steve, now that he’s not a posturing, mouthy asshole.

Well, he’s still kind of mouthy. But Jonathan doesn’t mind it.

“Sure,” he says. “I’ve got time before I need to be home.”

Jonathan has never been inside Steve’s house. He kind of expected it to look the way it does: clean, expensive, untouched. As though no one actually lives here. There’s a mess in the kitchen sink - Steve obviously didn’t clean up after himself this morning - but otherwise everything seems to be immaculate.

Steve’s room is another story. There’s clothes hanging sloppily on the side of his laundry hamper, his bed is unmade, and there’s a jumble of hair products - including a dusty set of hot stick hair rollers, the kind Jonathan’s mom uses - scattered across his dresser. Jonathan pretends he doesn’t see the bottle of Farah Fawcett spray.

“Huh, it’s kind of a shithole in here,” Steve observes, as though he’d forgotten the state in which he’d left his room. He hastily and haphazardly makes his bed and shoves the rest of his laundry into the hamper.

Jonathan doesn't care how messy it is. Steve saw his house when it was halfway torn apart with Christmas lights strung up every which way, and again when it was plastered with drawings of tunnels on every possible surface. No amount of disarray can really phase Jonathan after that.

They get themselves set up. Steve pulls a chair out from under another pile of laundry, and then digs in his closet for a couple of those folding wire-frame music stands. Next he gets onto his hands and knees, reaching underneath his bed, and drags a dusty guitar case out from it. Jonathan sneezes when Steve pats it clean.

"So," Steve says. He's sitting on his bed, fiddling with the pins; the pitch overshoots a bit into sharpness and he frowns. Jonathan is sitting on the chair opposite him. "What do you want to learn?"

Jonathan frowns at him. "Uh, how to not suck?"

Steve nods as though this is a perfectly acceptable answer. "Easy. Done. Next question, please."

Jonathan laughs at the sheer audacity. "You don't know that I don't suck, man."

"No, I do know that you don't suck because I heard you playing today and once you figured out how to not choke your strings it was pretty damn good," Steve argues, and the confident, unabashed compliment causes heat to rise in Jonathan's cheeks. Steve sees his embarrassment and looks away, clearing his throat. "Considering you haven't so much as touched a guitar since Bowman's class," he adds to his closet door.

"Nancy told you that too?" Jonathan asks, exasperated, and Steve's cheeks turn faintly pink; it's all the answer Jonathan needs. "You two are still close," he says, and it's not a question, not really. He's seen the way the two interact, the friendly jabs and teasing they put the other through on a daily basis.

"Sort of," Steve concedes. He's still staring at his closet door, and his fingers have begun lightly strumming at the strings beneath them. Every so often he shifts to a new chord, seemingly without thinking

about it. It's nice. Jonathan is kind of mesmerized. "I mean, yeah, we are, but not in the way everyone thinks, y'know? I'm not trying to get into her pants or anything. It's just...different now, I guess. We're friends, but it's still kind of..." he trails off, and his fingers still on the strings, allowing the sound to die out.

"Hey, I get it," Jonathan says, and Steve finally looks at him. His eyes are tired, more tired than Jonathan has ever seen them except for maybe the night they beat the shit out of the Demagorgon together, after the adrenaline wore off. "Believe me, I get it. We're still friends, too, but it's...hard to talk, sometimes. Half the time I can't think of anything to say and then I wonder if we ruined our friendship." It's freeing, admitting that. And to the only other person in Hawkins who probably knows how he feels, too.

Steve huffs out a relieved laugh. "You too, huh," he muses. "Or...I can't really say we were friends before we dated, but. I get it?"

It's - nice, talking to Steve like this. Without any of the pretense or bluster. He wonders now: if either of them had bothered to reach out after the whole Demagorgon thing, would things have been different? With Steve, with Nancy, with everything. If Steve had been in the picture, or, hell, anywhere near the periphery, would Jonathan have approached Nancy that night in Bauman's bunker? He doesn't think he would have. It's too easy to picture, and makes Jonathan ache for something that never existed.

"So you took Bowman's class, which means you probably don't know a whole lot besides some chords and scales," Steve guesses correctly, and suddenly they're back in lesson-mode. Jonathan shows him what he knows (which isn't a lot), and Steve shows him how to play some more scales, and then some more chords. He's a good teacher - better than Bowman, at the very least - and by the time Jonathan's fingers have started to hurt and they call it a night he feels he has a pretty good handle on them, all thanks to Steve's encouragement.

"Oh, here," Steve says, digging around in a pile of books he'd pulled out from his closet. He holds out one titled EASY GUITAR: FIFTEEN POPULAR SONGS FOR BEGINNERS and Jonathan takes it. He flips through it, heart sinking with every page.

“Um,” he says, squinting down at the lines and numbers, “I don’t know how to read this.”

Steve’s eyebrows shoot up towards his floppy fringe. “Oh, shit,” he says, “I completely forgot. Shit. Okay, gimme a sec.” He grabs a notebook from the book pile, scootches back on his bed until he can lean over and grab a pen from his desk, and starts doodling. After a few minutes, he rips the page out and passes it to Jonathan.

“I’ve written down all the chords you know, and their corresponding tabs,” Steve explains, and then points them all out to Jonathan. It...makes sense, he thinks.

“Thanks,” he says, brow furrowed, and Steve laughs at the trepidation in his voice.

“With a bit of practice it’ll be like second nature,” he assures Jonathan. “My teacher used to say it’s like learning a second language. Not that I was ever any good at that.”

Jonathan folds the paper and carefully tucks it into one of the compartments in his case. He was never very good at languages either; he’d taken Spanish for a semester and came out of it knowing how to say, “My name is Jonathan and I like pancakes.” A thought strikes him. “How are you getting to school tomorrow?” he asks. Steve’s lips purse, pulling back into a small grimace.

“Dunno,” he says. “Dad won’t be too happy about the car. I might have to pull out my bike.”

What the fuck. In March? No. “I’ll give you a ride,” Jonathan says, bewildered. There’s still snow on the ground, for fuck’s sake. The last thing he needs is for Steve to slip on a patch of slush and crack his head on the pavement.

“You don’t have to,” Steve tries to say, but Jonathan shakes his head.

“I want to,” he insists. He busies himself with gathering his belongings so he doesn’t have to look at Steve’s shocked expression. “As thanks for this. For teaching me.”

“Oh,” Steve says, and when Jonathan dares to look over he’s blinking

owlishly at him. "Okay. That's...that'll be cool, then."

Steve follows him downstairs to the front door. "You don't go to school freakishly early or anything, do you?" he asks while Jonathan is putting on his shoes.

Jonathan straightens up and gives Steve a look that he hopes reads as, *are you serious?*, and then opens the front door. "I'll see you around 7:30."

Steve's driveway is empty the next morning. Jonathan doesn't know if that means his parents left extremely early, or if they just didn't bother coming home.

Jonathan is starting to get an idea of what kind of people Steve's parents are. He doesn't think he likes them. They probably wouldn't like him, either, so it's fine.

He knocks on the door, and when Steve opens it he's completely unsurprised to see the other boy still in his pajamas with a toothbrush sticking out of the corner of his mouth. His hair is, as always, perfectly and purposefully messy. Jonathan checks his watch, very deliberately.

"I know, I know, I slept through my alarm," Steve drawls, rolling his eyes, though the effect is ruined by the frothy toothpaste dotting his lips. "Gimme, like, five minutes."

Jonathan waits at the dining room table while Steve finishes getting ready. There's a few family pictures set up around the room, some propped up on the cabinets lining the walls, some framed and hung on the wall. Steve doesn't look very old in any of them.

After what seems like ages Steve appears in the doorway, dressed and with his backpack hanging off one shoulder. "Let's blow this popsicle stand," he says with all the confidence of someone who doesn't realize exactly how lame they sound. Jonathan raises an eyebrow at him but doesn't comment on it.

Jonathan soon learns that if he wants a quiet drive to school, he

probably shouldn't listen to David Bowie. Steve sings along to every song, seems to know every single lyric, and is so obnoxiously terrible at doing a Bowie impression that Jonathan almost wants to chuck him out of the window at their first stop sign. He doesn't, and by the time they roll into the school parking lot he's actually bobbing his head along a little bit while Steve belts his lungs out in the passenger seat.

It's a shame, Jonathan thinks, that they can't just keep driving until the tape runs out. Until his gas runs out. Until the road runs out.

Steve joins him and Nancy in the cafeteria for lunch that day, bringing with him a basket of chicken fingers and fries. "Byers, why aren't you practicing?" he demands, accusatory, and Jonathan sputters indignantly. He is *clearly* still eating. Nancy almost succeeds in hiding her snort behind her hand.

"The basement hallway is kind of a shitty spot for learning guitar," he recites. Steve narrows his eyes.

"No excuses, Byers. I won't have you embarrassing yourself in front of your brother on my watch."

Jesus christ. "Fine. But can I finish, you know, *eating*, first?"

"True art waits for no one," Steve says.

"True art can shut up and eat his french fries," Jonathan retorts, and then takes a bite out of his sandwich, pointing to his chewing mouth whenever Steve tries to say anything else. He leaves Steve and Nancy once he finishes eating, and heads down to the shitty, damp hallway to get in the requisite twenty minutes Steve had assigned him the night before.

Steve has a pained expression on his face. "It sounds good," he says, but when Jonathan shifts to another chord, fingers squealing against the nylon strings again, he winces. "Okay, fucking stop that, please."

Jonathan hadn't been doing it on purpose at first. The sound doesn't bother him - it reminds him of the squeaking of sneakers against the

gym floor, actually - but Steve had sucked his lips over his teeth the third time he'd done it, and Jonathan, always curious, wanted to see how far he could push it before Steve lost his mind.

He'd made it to eight.

"I know you know what you're doing, and I know you know it's driving me a little bit up the wall," Steve continues, "and if this is payback for lunchtime then *fuck you* and please oh my god stop."

Jonathan eases off the strings.

"*Thank* you. Okay, so which song did you pick from the book to learn?" Steve asks.

"Heart of Gold," Jonathan replies, flipping to the correct page. "Neil Young. The tabs look pretty simple, but I'm having a hard time with the rhythm."

Steve nods. "Understandable. What are you having problems with?"

Jonathan doesn't think "everything," will fly as an answer, so he shrugs. "I think it will be easier to just show you," he says, and when Steve gestures for him to go on, he does so.

He doesn't make it to the chorus before Steve tells him to stop. "Your strumming's all out of whack," he explains. "You're doing it like this -" he imitates Jonathan's movements, and they look goofy, even to him. "When it should be more like this." His second demonstration looks smoother and sounds much better. "Give it a try."

Jonathan does. It feels, and sounds, a little better, but it's still not great. "I don't get why this is so hard," he gripes, frowning down at his strumming hand and willing it to start cooperating.

"Practice," Steve replies automatically. "Sorry, I know that doesn't help. I mean, it does, in the long run, but not right now. Where'd you learn how to strum, anyway?"

Jonathan gives him a look: *do you even have to ask?* "Bowman's class," he says anyways, just in case Steve doesn't parse that all from one glare. "It was usually just on one chord, though."

“God, he sounds like such a shit teacher. How did he even explain it to you guys?” Steve asks, and then makes an excited noise as Jonathan manages the chord change seamlessly.

“Well, he used to say, ‘strum like a toilet seat at a college mixer party.’”

Steve looks nonplussed. “What - what the fuck does that mean?” he asks, voice strained.

“Up, down, up, down, up, down,” Jonathan recites with a straight face.

“Jesus fucking christ,” Steve breathes. “No wonder you guys didn’t learn anything.”

Jonathan can’t help it: he laughs. And then Steve is laughing with him. “He didn’t even teach you how to read tabs,” Steve wheezes. “How the fuck are you supposed to play guitar if you don’t know how to read *tabs* ?”

“One day,” Jonathan says, wiping his eyes, “he told us to just practice our fingering and then sat at his desk and put his head down.”

“Oh my god,” Steve laughs.

“For the entire period,” Jonathan elaborates, and Steve laughs harder.

“How hungover was he?” Steve asks. He’s clutching at his side.

“No idea,” Jonathan says, shaking his head. “He didn’t even get up when the bell rang.”

“Only the best for Hawkins High,” Steve utters disdainfully, and Jonathan couldn’t agree more.

They’ve gotten into a sort-of routine. Jonathan picks Steve up in the morning at around 7:30. Steve sings along to whatever Jonathan is listening to if he knows the words. They arrive at school, part ways, and meet up again in the cafeteria at lunch before Jonathan hides

himself away in the boiler room hallway to practice. They meet again after school and Jonathan drives them to Steve's, where they spend a couple hours having a lesson in between goofing off. Jonathan goes home, and tries not to think too much about how Steve's eyes, brown and warm, shine when he laughs.

On Friday Jonathan can't stay since he has to work, so he drops Steve at home - overriding Steve's protests that he can walk, it's fine, with a, "Steve, it's snowing," - before spending a frigid few hours pumping gas. He flips off Jenny whenever she looks out the window at him.

He gets off work on time - Jenny is currently "on break" with her boyfriend, so she has no excuse to wheedle him into staying late - and then drives to the Wheelers'. Karen answers the door, and yells down the stairs that Jonathan is here. He and Will pile into his Ford.

"Can we listen to Queen?" Will asks, and even though they've been listening to Queen every day through Will's bedroom door, Jonathan acquiesces.

So Will shuffles around in the glove box for a minute before pulling out Hot Space, and they listen to one of Jonathan's least favourite Queen albums on the way home. He'd bought it because of the duet with David Bowie, and only ever pulls it out when he wants to listen to it.

Jonathan pulls into their driveway. Before he kills the engine, he says, "Wait a minute, there's a song I want to show you." He ejects the tape, flips it to its B side, inserts it back into the cassette player, and fast-forwards to the very last song of the album.

Will is enthralled immediately. He bobs his head to the beat, a smile unfurling on his lips, and Jonathan is proud that his little brother at least has the good sense to like one of the most iconic collaborations in recent history. Jonathan even starts singing along about halfway through, shocking a surprised and delighted laugh out of Will. By the time the song fades out with the sharp finger snaps Jonathan loves, Will is humming along.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Jonathan says. He ejects the tape and kills the engine.

"Can I learn that one?" Will asks in awe. Jonathan hands him the tape.

"Sure," he says. He doesn't even have to think twice about that answer. "But first we gotta actually teach you how to play."

Jonathan calls Steve. He has to look through all the papers in his guitar case for his number - Steve had scrawled it down on one of the sheets yesterday - and doesn't even think about the fact that his parents might answer before the ringing stops and Steve says,

"Yoooooooo, this's Steve."

"Hey, it's me," Jonathan says. "Jonathan."

"Jonathan!" Steve repeats. "Man, I was kinda hoping you'd call. I found a little hair scrunchie that would probably look pretty decent with your sweater. Y'know the one, it's, like, beige, or tan, or whatever. Has the crinkly edges."

Jonathan frowns. "Am I interrupting something?" he asks. The burgeoning excitement that had been swelling like a balloon in his gut since he came inside has begun to deflate a little.

"What? Nah," Steve says. "Just lil' ol' me here tonight. What'd you need?"

"I'm, uh, do you have the tabs for Under Pressure?" Jonathan asks.

Steve hums on the other end of the line. And then he keeps humming. "Shit, man, I dunno actually. I could take a look around?" He fumbles the phone, and in the staticky mess of interference Jonathan hears the crack and hiss of a can opening.

Oh. That would explain a few things. "Is that a beer?" Jonathan asks, just to be sure.

"Caught me," Steve admits before taking a very audible sip, and Jonathan hates how he can hear the lazy smile through his voice. "You wanna come over and help me look? Honestly I probably can't find anything right now."

"I work in the morning," Jonathan says, and hates that it's true. Not that he *wants* to be around a drunk Steve Harrington, exactly, just that. He wouldn't mind being drunk *with* Steve Harrington. If that makes sense.

"Boooooo," Steve boos. "S'all good, man. I know you gotta, uh, what exactly is it you do?"

"I work at the gas station," Jonathan says.

"Which one?"

There's only two in town. "Gus's."

"Ohhhh , okay, yeah, that makes sense," Steve says, and he's probably nodding even though Jonathan can't see it. The thought makes Jonathan smile. "Welp, next week then."

"I work every weekend," Jonathan reminds him, and Steve makes a frustrated noise.

"Ugh, you're right. I hate when you're right," he complains. "We'll figure something out. I'm not ending this school year without seeing you puke your guts out."

"Drink some water," Jonathan says, and they hang up.

It was worth spending almost all his money on a new guitar to see the look on Will's face when he opens the case.

"Oh my god," Will breathes, running his fingers over the smooth, polished wood.

"A few rules, before you accidentally drop it," Jonathan says, and holds out the strap for Will to take. "Always wear this. *Be careful* with it, please. Don't screw around with loosening and tightening the strings too much; I don't have any extras." He knows Will will treat the guitar with utmost care, but it's not him he's really worried about. "And don't let your friends touch it."

"Aw, what?" Will grouches, giving him a betrayed look.

“Do you want Dustin getting grease all over everything?” Jonathan asks pointedly. “Or Mike snapping a string?”

Will makes a face. “Okay, fine, no one gets to touch it.”

“That includes El’s mind power stuff,” Jonathan says. He can picture all too clearly how that could go wrong.

“Alright, I get it, my friends are klutzes! Can we please begin?” Will says, exasperated.

Jonathan shows him how to attach the strap, and then how to hold the instrument properly. Or, as proper as he knows how to. He shows Will the different strings and tells him the names, plucking each one on his own guitar so Will can get an ear for the pitch. And then he shows Will how to tune the thing with the tuning fork he filched from the overflowing box in the music room at school.

He tries his best to explain tabs and how to read them, but Will’s confused frown tells him he’s probably doing this out of order, so he abandons that idea for now and instead shows him how to play a C-chord. Will is delighted when it doesn’t sound like strangled straws, and immediately writes down which frets make the chord. And then Jonathan remembers that he hasn’t explained what frets are yet, so he does that, showing off the difference in pitch for each fret by playing up the B-string, one fret at a time.

All in all, Jonathan would call it a pretty successful lesson.

“How’d it go?” his mom asks, once Jonathan extrapolates himself from Will’s bedroom.

“I can play a C-chord!” Will yells from within his room, and then demonstrates loudly.

“Oh, wonderful,” Joyce says, tilting her head uncertainly at Jonathan.

“It went well,” Jonathan confirms.

Honestly, Jonathan is a little bit afraid at how quickly Will picked everything up. Bowman may be a shit teacher, but they didn’t learn

chords until halfway through the semester.

He calls Steve.

“Yo. Steve here.”

“I think my brother might be some kind of musical genius,” Jonathan says, “and I’m kind of freaking out.”

He can hear the squint in Steve’s eyes when he speaks. “What, is he, like, jamming out?”

“Sort of?” Jonathan says. “I taught him a chord and he won’t stop playing it, if that counts.” He holds the phone away from his ear so Steve can hear.

Steve is laughing when he brings the phone back to his ear. “Dude, knowing one chord doesn’t mean he’s a progeny or anything.”

“Do you mean prodigy?” Jonathan asks.

“I think so?” Steve says. “I’m hungover. Doesn’t matter. Listen, unless he’s the next Mozart or whatever you have nothing to worry about. How’s your strumming coming along?”

“Fine,” Jonathan lies.

“Sure it is,” Steve says, and then dissolves into queasy laughter. “Sorry. Just thinking about toilet seats. Anyway. If it’s not up to snuff on Monday we’re going to spend the entire lesson going over it. I *will* teach you how to strum properly if it kills me.”

“I think at that point I’d just quit,” Jonathan says flatly.

“Don’t you dare,” Steve threatens.

It turns out Steve doesn’t have the tabs to Under Pressure because he quit seriously playing guitar a year before it came out. They spend an hour going through his music books and loose leaf scores before Steve sits ramrod straight and says, “oh, fuck, I’m an idiot.”

Jonathan wants to strangle him for wasting so much time, but instead he says, “We’re going to Redfield’s tomorrow after school.”

“You think they’ll have it?” Steve asks, skeptical, and Jonathan shrugs.

“If not, we can always check the thrift store. Jeremy’ll be glad to see me again,” Jonathan says, sarcastic. Secretly, he kind of wants to rub it in the guy’s face.

On the bright side, his strumming is getting better. Steve reckons they can start doing fingerpicking soon, as long as Jonathan keeps improving.

Will is practicing when he gets home. Quietly, so as not to disturb him, Jonathan grabs his camera from his room and then, quietly, opens the door to Will’s. Will doesn’t even look up until the flash goes off.

“Dude,” he complains, so Jonathan takes another picture, just because.

Will’s annoyed groan follows him back to his own room. Tomorrow he’s going to find the tabs for Under Pressure with Steve, and if neither Redfield’s, the thrift store, or the library has them, Jonathan has a feeling he can convince Steve to help him write the tabs out himself.

Tomorrow will be a good day.

Notes for the Chapter:

Bowman's behaviour is based off of one of my high school teachers. I never had class with him, but I heard the stories, man.

Also just realized Bowman sounds an awful lot like Bauman and I SWEAR that was unintentional lmao

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

I moved...

Don't move across the province during a pandemic, it suuuuuuucks :')

As always, big thanks to [Kypros](#), who reminds me how human beings are supposed to interact.

Jonathan and Steve didn't really speak to each other all that much, after the night they fought the Demogorgon together. Jonathan never brought up the fact that Steve was originally there to apologize - to *him* , first, before his own girlfriend - and Steve, well. Steve had seemed to want to forget the whole thing had happened. And Jonathan was never quite ready to bridge that gap between them; he never quite plucked up the courage to say, "hey, so, um, about that night," so he let it lie.

If someone had told Jonathan that night that a little over a year later he would be rolling into a parking spot in front of Redfield's after school while Steve tapped an enthusiastic drum solo onto the dashboard of his shitty Ford, Jonathan probably would have barked out a disbelieving laugh, paid the ridiculous thought no more mind, and gone about his day.

Redfield's is just as shiny as it was last week. Jonathan resists the urge to squint at all the glittering metal under the bright showroom lights. He's dreading asking the sales associate for help - it seems almost inappropriate to ask for Queen music at such a store and he's not sure how he would even begin to pose that question - but Steve immediately takes the lead once he steps through the door, making a beeline for the display of guitar scorebooks.

"Been a while since I've been here," Steve mutters. He's begun shuffling through the layers of books at one end of the display, occasionally pulling one off the shelf and flipping to the table of contents before putting it back. Jonathan begins his own shuffling at

the other end of the display.

“Anyone who comes here should be warned that they’ll need a pair of sunglasses,” Jonathan says, and Steve huffs out a laugh.

“Right?” he agrees, squinting up at the blinding lights.

By the time they meet in the middle, Jonathan is beginning to hate the words “CONTENTS” and “INDEX.” A shrug from Steve indicates he’s had no luck either. They leave the store empty-handed under the disapproving eye of the sales associate.

The thrift store is thankfully just a short drive from Redfield’s. Jeremy doesn’t acknowledge them save for a skeptical eyebrow-lift in Steve’s direction before returning to his skeezy magazine.

The music books here aren’t as meticulously organized as the ones at Redfield’s. In fact, there seems to be no rhyme or reason at all for how any of the books have been displayed; Jonathan spots a technical exercise book for piano beside a romance novel, and after sharing a dubious look with Steve they begin the annoying process of sifting through the paperbacks in search for something vaguely guitar-related.

“Be sure to put those back,” Jeremy grumbles from the counter. “Don’t wanna screw up the order.”

“Yeah, for sure,” Steve says, and Jonathan’s not quite sure that Jeremy catches the sarcasm apparent there.

When all is said and done and Jonathan is pretty sure they’ve looked at all the books (relevant or not) the thrift store has to offer, they’ve got nothing.

“Library next?” Steve suggests. Jonathan checks his watch. They’ve got about an hour before the library closes. Plenty of time.

The librarian is not pleased to see Jonathan back for the second time in as many weeks.

“Is your brother planning on stopping by any time soon?” she asks

pointedly to Jonathan, who makes an *I don't know* face accompanied by a shrug.

"Hey, you got any Queen?" Steve asks before she can needle Jonathan further. She gives him an affronted look.

"I'm still waiting on the books you borrowed *four months ago* , Mr. Harrington," she bites out, tone clipped, and Steve's face undergoes several transformations: from confusion, to understanding, to dawning horror.

While Steve fumbles for an excuse under the librarian's oppressive glare, Jonathan begins flipping through the reference cards. At some point Steve must manage to mollify her ire (Jonathan has long since tuned them out); she sniffs in disdain and informs them that any music books - specifically music books pertaining to Queen - are filed on the shelving unit in the back corner. Steve nearly trips over his own feet in his haste to get away from her.

"Four months?" Jonathan asks - whispers, sort of - while running his finger over the many spines of old musical scores. Lots of ABBA, lots of Patsy Cline, lots of Neil Diamond.

Steve groans. He pulls a book from the shelf, flips to its contents page, grimaces, and puts it back. "I took out a bunch of books around Halloween," he says. He's looking straight ahead at the spines in front of him. "After everything that happened...guess I forgot I had 'em. I don't even know where I put them."

"What were they about?" Jonathan asks. He doesn't need to know, not really, and isn't expecting an answer. Or, at least, not a straightforward one.

Steve scrunches up his face like he does when he's trying to remember something. "I think...they were for some term papers? Some big-ass books with language from, like, the eighteenth century or something. Reading them gave me a headache."

Jonathan nods. It makes sense Steve would forget about something as inconsequential as library books after - all that. He realizes Steve probably can't see him - he's still staring straight ahead at the books -

so he says,

“I kept forgetting to brush my teeth.”

This makes Steve look at him. “What?”

“After - the first time, and the second time,” Jonathan says carefully, aware of the librarian just out of earshot, “I would wake up, get dressed, make breakfast, and leave for school. I kept forgetting to brush my teeth, and I'd have to turn around and go home. Sometimes I'd get all the way to school and then realize I didn't know whether I locked the front door, so I'd have to call mom - if she was working evenings - and get her to check for me.”

He doesn't mention that these experiences aren't exactly exclusive to his dealings with the Upside Down and all the fuckery involved with that place. There had been points in his life where he'd had to write down everything into a checklist. Once Lonnie left, it had gotten better.

Steve is nodding. “Sometimes it feels like the days are nothing. I blink and, *bam*, it's night time. And I have no idea where the time went or what I did during the day.”

“Have you tried a journal?” Jonathan asks, and it's definitely crossing a boundary of some sort, but Steve is giving him that deer-about-to-be-hit-by-a-car look again so he barrels on. “It can help. Writing things down, I mean. That way you can keep track of what you've done even if you don't remember it.”

Steve is blinking at him in that owlish manner that Jonathan had found difficult to look at, the night of their first lesson. Then that lopsided smile unfurls and Jonathan really can't look anymore, so he looks at the spines in front of him.

“Thanks, dude,” Steve says, and then, seeing the embarrassed flush crawling up Jonathan's neck, “no, really, I mean it. I, uh, haven't really told anyone about this. It - I'm gonna try the journaling thing.”

“Cool,” Jonathan says to the spines, and tries to tamp down on the weird bubbling feeling in his chest before it can reflect on his face.

“Let me know how it goes.”

“I can't believe we're zero for three,” Steve complains. He's tapping his knee in irritation. “How fucking backwards is this place that nobody carries any Queen at all?”

Jonathan doesn't point out that he very easily found and purchased some Queen tapes over the years and that their failure lies in the medium they've been searching for. He's discovered that Hawkins doesn't have much in the way of guitar music.

“We could try the music place at Starcourt,” Jonathan suggests, resigned. He would rather avoid the mall and its crowds, but...

“Nah, fuck that place,” Steve says emphatically, and Jonathan is quietly relieved. “I have a better idea: instead of wasting more time looking for a book that probably doesn't exist anywhere in this stupid town, why don't we just go home and write the damn thing ourselves?”

This surprises a laugh out of Jonathan. “Actually, I was going to say that next,” he admits. “We probably could've finished it by now if we'd just done that.”

Steve heaves out a dramatic sigh. “Let's go get started then,” he says, and thankfully stops tapping his knee. “Transcribing music can be a pain in the ass, though, so don't blame me if you want to give up halfway through.”

Jonathan pulls out of the library parking lot. “I won't. Do you have a copy of the song? I, uh, I gave mine to Will.”

He can see the smirk leveled at him in his periphery and chooses to ignore it.

“Sure do.”

The way Steve chews on a pencil when he's concentrating is distracting.

Jonathan notices it almost immediately, the way Steve uses his fingers to twiddle the instrument idly in his mouth, and he wonders, inappropriately, whether Steve has an oral fixation.

“Stop,” Steve says, and Jonathan panics for a brief moment, wondering how he could have been so obvious, before he realizes Steve means the tape. He presses the stop button, rewinds to where Steve tells him to, and plays the set of bars again until Steve is sure he’s got the correct chord. Then he writes down the corresponding tab as well as how many measures that chord lasts, and they begin the process again.

Steve had admitted, before they began, that he was, and is, complete shit at anything related to ear training, so Jonathan had prepared himself for a tedious night with the cassette player. And now, if it weren’t for the fact that Jonathan has had years of practice getting used to listening to songs over and over again thanks to his brother, he’s positive he would probably hate this particular song after listening to the short, truncated clips of it repeated for what has seemed like hours.

They’re near the end of it now, where it’s more difficult to hear through the layers of music, and Steve has been having trouble discerning the correct chord.

Hence, the pencil in his mouth, and Jonathan’s distraction.

“Stop,” Steve says again, so Jonathan stops the tape.

It’s the first time they’ve spent one of these evenings mostly in silence, and with Steve doing most of the work Jonathan’s mind has had plenty of opportunity to wander. He can only look at the poster of some shiny new Cadillac so many times before he’s memorized every detail on the car’s grate, and if he keeps staring at the dusty set of hair rollers on Steve’s dresser he’s going to feel compelled to clean them. The rest of Steve’s room is nothing special; his desk is covered with unfinished homework, his laundry hamper has clothes hanging out of it again, and his curtains (still disgustingly matching the tacky wallpaper) are drawn, so Jonathan can’t even try looking out the window. The provocative pinup on the wall isn’t interesting either, unless Jonathan wants to take a guess at where all the airbrushing

has been done on the model.

That leaves Steve himself, and the stupid pencil in his stupid mouth with his stupid hair falling over his stupid eyes. He looks like a member of one of those boy bands that's all over television and the radio, but that feels mean even to think. Steve definitely looks better. More real. And when he smiles it's not just some fake flash of teeth for the camera.

"Stop," Steve says. He takes the pencil out of his mouth and writes down the chord. Jonathan rewinds the tape a little and lets it play the next few bars.

It's closing in on nine by the time they finish, and Jonathan almost does hate Under Pressure by this point.

Steve rubs at his eyes. "Dude, we did the whole song," he says, holding up the paper for Jonathan to see as though he hadn't just sat there for nearly four hours with him. "We're awesome."

"How long does it normally take?" Jonathan asks. Steve shrugs.

"Dunno, I never got through a whole song before." At Jonathan's exasperated look he holds up his hands in defence. "What? I told you I'm shit at it." He stretches, pulling his shoulders back and rolling his neck, then shuffles to the edge of the bed. "Gotta piss. Can you chuck that in the closet for me?" He jerks his chin at the cassette player and leaves the room.

Jonathan takes a moment to stretch out his neck, then grabs the player. Steve's closet is in about as much disarray as his room is; Jonathan has to organize several binders that fall out and onto him as soon as he opens the door, and there's only enough space on the high shelf to slot the cassette player in on its side.

That's when he sees it. Buried beneath an old pair of basketball shoes and a mountain of paper is the unmistakable glint of a music case's locks.

He really shouldn't be snooping the way he is, but the case is *tiny*. Carefully, so as not to disturb the rest of Steve's belongings piled

haphazardly on the shelf, Jonathan extracts the case and brings it over to Steve's bed.

He clicks open the locks. Inside is probably the smallest violin he's ever seen.

There's a groan from the doorway, and then Steve flops down on the other side of the violin case, staring down at the instrument with a mixture of embarrassment and distaste.

"Shoulda known you'd find that," he says, plucking at one of the strings. It sounds much different from a guitar.

"Sorry," Jonathan says. "I probably should've left it, but..."

"Nah, it's cool," Steve says, flapping a hand. "I dunno why I kept it. It's not like I've played violin since I was six."

"It's cute," Jonathan says, and Steve's face scrunches up in confusion.

"Cute?" he repeats.

"Yeah," Jonathan says, grinning. "Like, imagining cool and slick Steve Harrington as a little kid with such a...fancy, but small instrument. It's kinda cute."

Something strange happens then. Steve blushes.

He's never seen Steve blush before, or rather, not in this kind of way. He's seen the ruddy red flush of anger, high on his cheeks and blotching down his neck. He's seen the way shame colours his features, in those moments where Steve realizes he's done wrong. He's seen excitement manifest as a healthy pinkness blooming across his face.

He has never seen Steve Harrington blush in embarrassment (and maybe a bit of pleasure) after receiving a compliment.

It's not that Steve has never received a compliment. Quite the contrary; Jonathan had grown up watching Steve be complimented by seemingly everyone around him, and those words always seemed to roll off his shoulders like water off a duck's back. He's always

accepted them with the same casual confidence, the same words of thanks, the same nonchalance.

Jonathan has never made Steve blush. Jonathan has never *seen* Steve blush. He didn't know that Steve - casual, confident, cocky Steve - *could* blush. It's - Jonathan likes it.

It feels almost too intimate, as though the sight of Steve Harrington blushing is the modern-day equivalent of a Victorian lady showing a bit of ankle, and Jonathan doesn't know what to do. His own face is heating up now, his words - why the fuck did he have to go and call Steve *cute* - finally catching up to him, and Steve is staring at him, eyes wide under furrowed brows, mouth opening and closing silently like a beached fish.

Wow, blushing *and* speechless? That must be some kind of record.

"Sorry," Jonathan says, tearing his eyes away from Steve. "That was weird."

"No," Steve gasps out, "no, it's - that wasn't weird. I mean, okay, it actually kind of is, but it's totally cool. I don't think it's weird."

I don't think it's weird .

Jonathan opens his mouth to say - what, exactly? But before he can stumble his way through another awkward sentence, the loud rumble of a car pulling into the driveway makes itself apparent. The engine cuts and car doors slam.

"Fuck," Steve breathes. "They're home early."

"I should go," Jonathan says. He wonders if he can slip out without catching the attention of Steve's parents.

Steve grimaces. "Yeah. Sorry."

Jonathan packs up his stuff as the front door downstairs squeals open and then thuds shut, and the two boys slink out into the hall.

Steve's parents are waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

“Hey,” Steve says, but his parents aren’t looking at him.

The looks both of the older Harringtons are giving Jonathan aren’t - hostile, exactly, but it’s clear in Steve’s dad’s expression and his mother’s curled lip that he is not a welcome presence in their home.

“Steven, dear, who is this?” Steve’s mom asks in an airy falsetto, as though she doesn’t know. She’s blinking rapidly at Jonathan as though each flutter of her perfectly curled eyelashes will make him disappear.

“Jonathan Byers.” Steve’s dad says it like a question, turning that disapproving expression onto Steve, and Steve makes a frustrated sound in the back of his throat. He thunders down the stairs, Jonathan trailing after him, and wrenches open the front door without responding.

“Um. Nice to meet you,” Jonathan says quietly before following Steve out into the dark.

He’s had that sort of reaction from adults before. Adults whose only exposure to the Byers family has been through rumours and nasty gossip and watching Lonnie fall face-first into his own puke down at the bar. The sort of reaction that says they know exactly what kind of person his father is and that they expect no better from him by virtue of shared blood. The sort of reaction that further cements Jonathan’s suspicions that the only thing Lonnie ever did when he went out was bitch about his nagging wife and queer-ass kids.

“God, they’re such fucking *assholes*,” Steve grinds out. He’s leaning against the wheel well of Jonathan’s car, arms crossed and shoulders hunched against the night’s chill.

“Are they gonna ban me from your house?” Jonathan asks, and he’s only partly joking.

Steve shrugs. “Nah. I mean, maybe? You ever climb up a drainpipe?”

Jonathan raises an eyebrow at him. “No.”

“I have. It sucks, don’t do it.”

“Then why’d you suggest it?” Jonathan asks.

“In case they actually do ban you, duh,” Steve replies, leveling Jonathan with a looking bordering on condescending, except he’s smiling. “It’ll be fine, don’t worry. I’ll go talk to them and let them know you aren’t the boogeyman.”

“I don’t think they’re worried about me being the boogeyman,” Jonathan comments drily, opening his car’s door. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, pushing himself off of Jonathan’s hood. “7:30 on the dot.”

“Cool,” Jonathan says. He steps into his car and goes to close the door, except Steve’s got a hand on it still.

“Sorry,” Steve says again. Jonathan shakes his head.

“I’m used to it.”

Steve looks like he wants to say something else; his jaw is working and his fingers are almost white-knuckled on the edge of Jonathan’s door, but in the end he simply nods and lets go, bidding Jonathan a quiet, “night, dude,” before turning and heading back to his house.

As he turns out of Steve’s driveway Jonathan is dimly aware that he’s running away, and not just from Steve’s parents.

There’s a pamphlet sitting on the living room coffee table when he gets home. **HAWKINS MIDDLE SCHOOL ANNUAL TALENT SHOW** is printed across the top in bolded font, and underneath is a badly photocopied picture of a guy playing a saxophone. There’s details on how the kids can sign up and the date for the show is near the end of May.

“You gonna sign up?” Jonathan asks Will, who’s carefully sketching a bird-dragon-camel hybrid onto a piece of paper beside the pamphlet.

“Mhm,” Will replies, not looking up from his drawing.

Will has signed up in previous years, usually with his group of friends, sometimes just with Mike, and Jonathan wouldn't exactly call the science experiments the kids bring to the show talented, but it is pretty funny to watch his little brother nearly catch fire to the school's gym every year. He's looking forward to seeing what they come up with this time, especially now that El and Max are part of the party. Visions of Max skateboarding around the gym while "juggling" flaming bowling pins fill his mind.

"Oh, welcome home," his mom says distractedly from the kitchen. She's working on a crossword puzzle in the newspaper. "There's leftovers in the fridge if you're hungry. Did you find the thingy you were looking for?"

Jonathan tells her about the search while heating up some food in the microwave. The TV drones on in the background, a bored weather forecaster explaining why they're expecting a drop in temperatures over the next week.

"You wrote it out yourself?" Joyce asks, tilting her head in confusion. "That sounds difficult."

"Sort of," Jonathan says. "Steve did most of the work."

His mom smiles at him then. "I'm glad you're getting along," she says. "It seems like it's been ages since you just...let yourself relax and have some fun."

Jonathan doesn't know where to look. He doesn't need to tell her that there haven't really been many moments for relaxation.

"Yeah," he says instead. "Steve's - cool."

Cool isn't really the word Jonathan should be using to describe Steve. If he wanted to be accurate, he'd say Steve is resourceful, or kind of goofy, or way nicer than he looks. Steve likes singing along to power ballads and he's actually pretty good at that - singing. And Steve is smarter than everyone thinks he is, worries about things more than everyone thinks he does, and he's always thinking, thinking, thinking, the gears that turn in his head unlike anything Jonathan has ever really seen before.

But he's talking to his mom, and he's not about to go spilling all of that to her, so he just leaves it at, *cool* .

Steve is waiting outside for him the next morning. His parents' car is still parked in the driveway.

"You know, I think this is the first time you've actually been ready on time," Jonathan says as Steve swings himself into the passenger seat.

"Dad took the day off today," Steve says, distaste evident in his tone. "Wanted to get out of there as soon as I could."

Jonathan frowns. "But their car..."

"Mom parks hers in the garage, only really uses it when dad stays home," Steve explains, because of course his family has three garishly expensive cars. "But I don't want to talk about them anymore. You think we can sneak into the office and make some copies of those tabs?"

Jonathan thinks that's a very good way to earn themselves a couple seats in detention, but Steve is confident he can sweet-talk the secretary into letting them have a couple pages for free, and Jonathan roars in laughter at Steve's impression of an attempt at seduction for a woman who must be old enough to be his grandmother.

Steve's parents thankfully return to their state of near-constant absence after an uncomfortable lesson on Tuesday, where the blaring sound of a newscaster reporting the day's events bleeding through the floor is so distracting Steve calls it early.

"He's doing it on purpose," he mutters grouchily, shutting his guitar case with perhaps more force than necessary. "Fucking dick."

Jonathan is beginning to understand Steve's animosity towards his parents, and he breathes a sigh of relief on Wednesday morning when he turns into Steve's driveway and notices a distinct lack of vehicles. The rest of the week passes much more smoothly until Saturday

morning dawns, bright and early and with a fresh layer of frost coating most of the surfaces outside. Jonathan thinks nothing of it until after work, when he has to grab his brush and scraper from the trunk because Jenny doesn't have one and her windshield frosted over during her shift.

He's greeted with the view of his guitar case sitting innocently among the rest of his trunk's things, and his heart plummets to his feet. He fumbles with the latches, flings the lid open, and lets out a string of curses so foul it would make Hopper blush.

The wood on the front has been separated by a large crack, just to the side of the sound hole.

If he weren't standing in the parking lot of Gus's Gas and supposed to be helping Jenny scrape her windows so she doesn't crash into a ditch on her way home, Jonathan would scream. Echoes of the weatherman's forecast ring through his head, as though to admonish him: *We're looking at a drop in temperature over the next week so make sure to bundle up! Expect a low of fifteen by this weekend.*

"Jonathan!" Jenny yells, teeth chattering, and Jonathan carefully puts his guitar back into its case as though that might undo the damage. He grabs his scraper and scowls at Jenny when she asks him what the hell took so long.

After helping Jenny he drives home as though in a fog, the gaping hole in his guitar a ghost before his vision. When he gets home and kills the ignition he doesn't get out of his car immediately, sitting with his hands on the steering wheel even as the air around him cools and he begins to shiver. Eventually he musters the courage to grab the instrument and bring it inside. The house is empty; Jonathan is thankful, at least, for that.

It looks just as bad the second time around. The crack is more of a split, running the entire length of the body, and the cold has warped the wood. Jonathan thinks he just might be screwed. He tries a chord anyway and, unsurprised, grimaces at how terrible it sounds.

He calls Steve.

“Y’ello,” Steve says.

“Steve,” Jonathan says, “there’s a problem.”

“Um,” Steve says, “what?”

“Guitar’s busted,” Jonathan says.

“ *What ?! How?!*”

Jonathan takes a deep breath. “I left it in my car overnight.”

There’s a beat of silence before Steve sucks in a breath and says, “Fuck.”

Jonathan doesn’t tell him why he left it in his car, doesn’t explain that he’d been so tired after work last night that he’d simply forgotten and gone to bed. The excuse sounds flimsy even to himself.

Steve is talking. “ - some glue, and some tape, and we’ll see if we can put that sucker back together.”

“What?” Jonathan says.

“The guitar,” Steve says, distraction evident in his voice. “I’ve got some shit I can bring over to fix it. See you in, like, half an hour.” And before Jonathan’s brain can even begin to process that, Steve hangs up.

The next half hour crawls by. Jonathan alternates between staring at the television - some uninteresting sitcom with awful laugh tracks has been playing since he got home - and pacing between the living room and his bedroom. His guitar sits on his bed, the crack along its face a grinning maw as though ridiculing him for doing something so ridiculous.

Finally, there’s a pounding at the door. Jonathan opens it to see Steve, flushed and out of breath, hair in disarray, and carrying a - is that a tool bag?

“Where’s the patient?” Steve wheezes, and Jonathan brings him down the hall. Steve takes one look at the damage and hisses out a low, “

fuck,” before he begins to poke and prod at the wood. Jonathan takes the opportunity to snoop in Steve’s bag, wondering at the clamps and wood glue.

“I didn’t know you knew how to, uh, repair a guitar,” he mumbles, and Steve grunts.

“Only tiny cracks,” he admits, shooting Jonathan an apologetic look. “This is pretty fucked.”

“Yeah,” Jonathan agrees, heaving out a sigh. “Yeah, it’s pretty fucked.”

Steve continues to poke and prod, even unstringing the guitar so he can slot a hand into the sound hole to try and fit the split, warped wood back together. Many frustrated groans and muffled curses later, he straightens up, running a hand through his already-disheveled hair, and points with his other hand at the mess of wood and steel and nylon behind him.

“So the bad news is that your guitar is way too fucked for me to fix,” he says somewhat sheepishly, nudging his toolbag with a toe. Jonathan’s stomach twists uncomfortably. “Don’t give me that look, Byers; I haven’t told you the good news yet.”

“And that is...?” Jonathan says, allowing his skepticism to colour his tone. He crosses his arms.

“Redfield’s is still open,” Steve says. “We could probably get you a new guitar and have it all tuned up by the time your brother gets home, yeah?”

Jonathan doesn’t mean to laugh. There’s nothing remotely funny about this situation, but the incredulous sound escapes him regardless. “I can’t afford a new guitar,” he says, like it should be obvious, because it is obvious.

“I’m buying,” Steve says easily, shrugging.

“No,” Jonathan says, shaking his head. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Well, no, but I want to,” Steve insists, “if it would help you out.”

Jonathan shakes his head again. "I said you don't have to. This is my problem, not yours."

Steve frowns at him then, tilting his head in confusion, like he can't quite understand why Jonathan won't let him spend an arm and a leg on something that was his own damn fault. "Dude, you can't teach your brother shit if you're playing on that," he argues, jerking his chin at the mess behind him, and Jonathan knows. He *knows*, but something about Steve wasting his money without a second thought rubs him the wrong way. "I don't get why this is such a big deal," Steve tries again after Jonathan doesn't reply. "Just let me buy you the guitar, man."

"It is a big deal," Jonathan snaps, and Steve jerks his head back, eyes wide. "You can't just go throwing your money at every single problem in life and hope that makes it go away."

Steve splutters. "I'm not *throwing* my money away," he retorts, and now there's an angry set to his jaw that Jonathan hasn't seen in a while. "Your brother wants to learn how to play guitar, and you need a guitar to teach him, so why won't you just let me buy it?"

"Because you can't keep buying me things as though it will make everything better!" Jonathan bites out, and although he only glances to the camera sitting propped on his dresser for a brief second, Steve notices, because *of course* he does. Steve's eyes wander guiltily to the camera before snapping back to Jonathan. The expression on his face is not a nice one.

"Is that what you think this is?" Steve asks, tone piercing, and now it's Jonathan's turn to be on the defensive. "You think I'm trying to, what, *buy* your friendship? What, like I'm so pathetic and so desperate for your attention that I'd throw a couple bills your way in the hopes you'd notice me?"

"No - "

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe I was doing this because I *wanted* to, because I actually *liked* you?" Steve demands, voice rising in timbre and volume as he gets more and more worked up. "Or has your head been stuck too far up your own ass to hear anything else

but your own pretentious bullshit? Because that's what this is, Byers, and don't try to deny it. You talk a big game about how people like me don't know what it's like to be you because your family is so poor - "

"Shut up," Jonathan says quietly, and Steve stops in his tracks at the furious tremble in his voice, "and get out of my house."

There's a painful moment of silence where Steve just stares at him, wounded, and then his incensed expression smooths over into sneering indifference. Jonathan hates it, hates how Steve is suddenly regarding him like he would a stranger. He has the distinct, hollow feeling that maybe he's fucked something up.

"Well, screw you too, Byers," Steve mutters, and he stoops to gather his things. "Y'know what, I actually thought you were pretty cool, but I guess I was wrong." He sweeps by Jonathan without looking at him. There's the sound of the front door opening and slamming shut, and then Jonathan is alone.

Notes for the Chapter:

:^)

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

I've finished the outline for this! :D

The phone is ringing.

Jonathan wishes it would stop. It's been ringing for what seems like hours, but he knows it's only actually rung about four times, because he's been counting. But no one is picking up, and it rings for a fifth time.

He'd somehow had a lesson with Will. Once Steve had left and the white-hot coil of anger in Jonathan's gut had simmered to a smouldering ember, he'd thrown his ruined guitar back into his trunk and thought up a lie for it. And when Will came home he'd questioned it, and the lie - *oh, I just forgot it at school yesterday, haha* - rolled off Jonathan's tongue as easily as if it were the truth.

Will saw through him, he knows that much; as good a liar as Jonathan has become, he can never seem to pull the wool over his brother's eyes. But Will had accepted it with an easy shrug of his shoulders and a nonchalant, "okay," and they'd had a lesson.

It went...fine, probably? Teaching without being able to show Will what he means is difficult, but his brother is smart and was able to pick up most of his explanations without a problem.

The phone rings for a fifth time. Heaving out a sigh, Jonathan swings his legs over the edge of his bed.

He'd made dinner while Will worked on homework in front of the television. Despite the conflicting thoughts hammering a painful rhythm against his skull he'd only burned the ground beef a little bit, and the sloppy joe sauce always covers that well so he hadn't worried about it.

Jonathan opens his bedroom door just as the phone rings for a *sixth* time, but the grating bells are thankfully cut off by his mom grabbing

the receiver and jamming it between her chin and shoulder.

“Hello?” she says, and even though her back is turned to Jonathan he can see the way her posture perks up at the other person’s greeting, shoulders straightening and head lifting. Must be Hopper. Rolling his eyes, Jonathan is about to shut his door again, but his mother’s next words send him careening down the hallway instead. “Well, sure, I can get him for you, but - Steve, honey, are you sure you’re okay?”

Standing next to Joyce, Jonathan can hear Steve’s response - a tellingly slurred, “oh, yeah, Mrs. Byers, I’m doing awesome,” so before the other boy can do any more damage Jonathan clears his throat, bringing his mother’s attention to him.

“Oh,” she says, frowning in concern. She lowers the phone from her ear and covers the mouthpiece with a hand as though that will actually block out any sound. “Oh, it’s Steve, dear. He...well, he seems to really want to talk to you?”

“Uh, yeah, he forgot something earlier,” Jonathan lies.

“Oh, was he over?” Joyce asks.

“What? No, no no nonono, I mean, yes, I was there, but *no*, I didn’t forget anything,” Steve insists tinnily from the phone. “I fucked up, is what I did. I fucked up *so bad*.”

“Well, I’m sure you can sort it out,” Joyce says rather more loudly than she needs to, doubtless for the benefit of Steve. She hands Jonathan the receiver wordlessly, giving him an exasperated look as she manoeuvres around both the phone’s cord and her son to return to the living room.

With the receiver in his hands, Jonathan isn’t sure what to do. He could hang up. He could tell Steve to go fuck himself before he hangs up.

“Jonatha-*an*,” Steve croons from the other end. “I know you’re there, Jonatha-*an*.”

“Why did you call me?” Jonathan asks, instead of telling him to go fuck himself and then hanging up.

"I wanted to apologize," Steve says, and if he weren't slurring all ways to Sunday - Steve's words sound more like *I wan-ne t'pologize* than an actual sentence - Jonathan might almost be charmed.

"Steve," he says firmly, "I'm not doing this with you right now."

"What?!" Steve splutters, appalled. Then, a bit more composed, "why?"

Jonathan nearly laughs, incredulous. He doesn't think he could fit the list on all the fingers of both hands. "For starters," he says, "you're - " he gives a quick look around to ensure his mom isn't paying any attention to him - "you're drunk," he hisses lowly, mindful of his mother's ever-discerning ear. "Call me when you're sober and maybe I'll accept any apology you try to give me, but whatever you say right now isn't going to cut it."

There's silence on the other end, and Jonathan almost feels bad about yelling at Steve until the next words come tumbling out of his mouth.

"Hey, this might be kind of a weird question, but do you think I'm an idiot?" Steve asks, to Jonathan's utter bafflement. Without waiting for an answer, he barrels on. "Sorry. That came out of nowhere. But I called Nancy to ask her what to do and she called me an idiot and it wasn't in the cute flirty way she used to do with me, you know? *Shit*, sorry, you didn't need to know that."

"I don't think you're an idiot," Jonathan says carefully, deciding to address the most obvious thing Steve had said before he'd gone off the rails on his tangent. "I just think that we shouldn't be having this conversation right now."

"Oh. Okay," Steve says easily, relief evident in his tone. "When can we have this conversation?"

Jonathan sucks his lips over his teeth, mouth flattening into an unimpressed line. He pulls in a breath through his nose. "I don't know. I'm - I'm still pretty pissed. To be perfectly honest, I don't really want to be talking with you right now, but I didn't want to let you cry all over my mom, so."

There's a guilty silence on the other end of the line, and Jonathan hates that he can't tell whether Steve is nodding or if he's simply standing there, very still. Finally, Steve pulls in a crackling breath and says, "Okay. Okay, I get it. I'll - uh, I won't call again. I'm - just, sorry."

"It's - " Jonathan cuts himself off before he can say *it's okay* , because it *isn't* , but he has the sinking, panicky feeling that if he doesn't say anything Steve will hang up and then - then, what? He'll never speak to Steve Harrington again? Part of him, the part that's still angry and hurt, thinks, *good* , who would want to keep talking to that dickhead anyway? But Jonathan knows, knows that if he pushes past the hurt feelings and shitty words and the memory of Steve's horrible sneering expression, he doesn't want things to go back to the way they were before. So he says, for lack of anything else but the fear of losing a friend, "I'll call you."

Steve lets out a breath that Jonathan didn't know the other boy was holding. "Okay. Okay, sounds, uh, sounds good. I'll talk to you then."

And then Steve actually does hang up before Jonathan can say anything else.

Jonathan stands with the receiver at his ear for a few more seconds before he slides it back onto the cradle. He slinks back to his room, thoughts and feelings a tangled knot inside his head.

Steve, drunk. Steve, apologizing. Steve, buying him expensive things because he thinks that will somehow make things right.

Lonnie used to do that, sometimes. After a particularly bad fight with his mom, he'd show up after work the next day with jewelry or expensive booze or a new pair of shoes. Joyce hated it, hated the way he could never own up to his bullshit and just say the words, *I'm sorry*, and Jonathan hated it too. Hates it.

(Sometimes, his mom would throw the trinkets back in his face and they would fight again, and the cycle would repeat, and then repeat again. Sometimes, she would accept the gifts, carefully and warily, as though *this time* it was different, *this time* things would change.

Things never changed. They fought, they made up, they fought again, and again, and again, until one day he came home from work and the remnants of Lonnie's belongings were in the front yard, and their car was gone, and his mother was sitting on the living room couch with a knife in her hand. He'd taken the knife gently from her trembling fingers and laid it down on the floor, and only then did Joyce allow herself to cry.)

He glances at his camera, perched atop his dresser.

Things never changed.

Sunday dawns bright, early, and bursting with anxiety.

Jonathan makes breakfast, eats, and tries not to think about how goddamn *awful* he feels as he puts the leftovers aside for his mom and Will. What he's feeling is shame, hot and cloying and familiar, but facing that shame would mean facing how horribly he overreacted the previous night, so he shoves it down under practised indifference and heads to work.

He's informed upon arrival at work that there's a new hire in need of training, and - lucky him - he's the man for the job. Jonathan thinks that's probably a bad decision, but the only other person working this shift is Jenny, and she's an infinitely worse choice, so he accepts the burden of teaching Frank - a spotty fifteen-year-old who is *way* too excited over the prospect of having a job - how to use the cash register. Jenny occasionally pulls faces at them from the pump, but Jonathan isn't bundled up in winter gear and shivering his ass off, so he ignores the jabs.

The house is empty when he gets home, as it always is for that brief hour before his mom and Will get back from therapy.

Jonathan had gone to the first few sessions, adamant in his presence after the colossal fuck-up following Dr. Owens' dismissal of Will's symptoms, but the new doctor seems to listen and Jonathan couldn't take off anymore Sunday shifts besides, considering the ever-increasing pile of bills on their living room's end table.

So now Jonathan is alone in his house, staring at the phone on the wall as though it will come alive at any minute and tell him how much he's fucked everything up.

He makes it through the preparation of dinner before he looks at the phone again. He should probably eat, he thinks, before he does anything stupid like call Steve.

So he eats, and he puts the leftovers aside for his family, and then his gaze is drawn back to the phone, hanging on the wall.

"Fuck it," Jonathan mutters to himself, and picks up the receiver.

Steve's number comes easily to his memory, and before he can think about this any further (and probably hang up), the phone is ringing, and Steve picks up.

"Hello?" he answers, and Jonathan has the brief, panicked thought that if he hangs up *now* Steve will never know it was him, but -

"Uh. Hey," he says. Just, hey.

There's a moment of silence that stretches on for so long Jonathan's not sure whether Steve just put the phone down and walked away, but then he says, "Hey. Uh, sorry for calling you shitfaced last night. Hope I didn't get you in trouble or anything."

"Nah," Jonathan says. "I mean, she definitely knew, but she didn't say anything."

"Christ," Steve groans. "Sorry."

"It's fine. Uh, do you remember - I said I'd call you when..."

"Oh, yeah. I...do you think this should be a phone conversation?"

This catches Jonathan off guard. "What?" he asks, frowning.

"It's just, this is kind of awkward," Steve explains, embarrassment stretched thickly over his words.

"I think it's going to be awkward no matter what," Jonathan argues.

He can't imagine seeing Steve's face will make any of this any easier.

Steve blows out a crackling sigh on the other end of the phone. "Dude, can I just - like, feel free to tell me to fuck off but can you meet me at school?"

Jonathan frowns. "Sure, but...how are you going to get there?"

"Bike."

"It's fifteen degrees out there. I'll come pick you up."

Steve makes a sound like he's about to argue, but thinks better of it and cuts himself off. "Are you sure?" he asks instead.

"Yes. Go get your coat."

Steve is waiting for him outside. He gets into Jonathan's car wordlessly; Jonathan turns around and heads back the way he came in silence. He doesn't say it, and Steve doesn't say it, but there's an understanding not to do this in front of Steve's house. Not if there's a chance this goes badly.

He ends up parking at Starcourt. This late it's closed, so the parking lot is abandoned. The sun is just beginning to dip below the vaulted glass ceiling by the entryway, casting dark shadows over the asphalt that creep towards Jonathan's car. Neither of them like Starcourt. In fact, Jonathan is quite sure they both hate the place, so it doesn't matter if Jonathan ruins Starcourt for them.

They sit, as the sun sinks lower, lower, behind the imposing building.

"I said some really shitty things to you," Steve says.

"Yeah," Jonathan agrees. "You did."

"I didn't mean any of it," Steve continues. "It was just - what's the word - bluster. I thought - well, I thought you were trying to be an asshole, to be honest. I thought you were just pitying me, or whatever, and that rubbed me the wrong way. Still doesn't excuse what I said though, and then I went ahead and got drunk and called

you while hammered? Shit, I've really made a mess of things."

"I shouldn't have kicked you out," Jonathan says. His words are careful and measured, practised because he rehearsed them over and over in his head on the drive over to Steve's. "I overreacted."

"No, no, it's cool," Steve shrugs it off easily. "But...is it about the camera? Because - and I know I should've said this ages ago - I'm sorry I broke it. And buying you a new one doesn't make up for the fact I did it."

Jonathan's stomach twists weirdly, hearing Steve *admit* he bought the camera, and he unconsciously releases a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding ever since the niggling suspicion began to scratch at the back of his mind, all those months ago.

Steve is still talking. "I asked Nancy to give it to you because I - uh, well, I knew you didn't want anything to do with me and didn't know how to give it to you without making you more mad, and I didn't want to - make you more mad? Shit, that's kind of lame."

Jonathan doesn't think it's lame. He's stunned, in fact - Steve Harrington, King Steve, was *nervous* about a potential rejection? Colour Jonathan surprised.

"But, don't get me wrong, I wasn't offering to buy the guitar to get you to like me, or anything. I just...wanted to help," Steve barrels on. "Which - okay, so Dustin - you know Dustin, right? One of Will's friends - told me that Will is really, *really* into guitar and he's trying super hard to improve because he wants to play that song at his school's talent show. But apparently Mike - Nancy's brother, you know him - is being a little bitch about it because they usually do the thing as a group? But Dustin thought it was pretty cool that Will wanted to do something different, and according to him so did everyone else, except Mike."

"Because he's being a little bitch," Jonathan finishes.

"Exactly," Steve says. "By the way, you're sworn to secrecy now. I promised Dustin on my life that I'd never tell anyone, and I'm kind of scared of what that little psychopath can do when he's pissed off."

“Great,” Jonathan says.

“I knew you wouldn’t be able to teach Will without a guitar of your own; I’m not trying to be a dick, dude, but you’re kind of not good enough for that yet. But I didn’t stop to think about literally anything except the fact that I could ‘fix’ the problem, and then I jumped to conclusions and said some *really fucking shitty* garbage...I’m sorry, man.”

It’s not what Jonathan expected, this apology. He’s not sure what he expected, in retrospect, but this? Steve’s honest sincerity catches Jonathan completely off guard. He doesn’t know what to say to that.

“I think...you deserve to know why I got so - weird, about it,” Jonathan says. He can’t meet Steve’s eyes for what he’s about to say next. Instead, he stares at the *change engine oil* light that’s glowing dimly on his dashboard. “It’s just...my dad.”

“Your dad?” Steve asks, and there’s no judgment behind the words, just confusion and curiosity because he can’t quite connect the dots in his head between what he knows of Lonnie Byers and what Jonathan is trying to tell him.

Jonathan remembers Steve’s expression back at the library, unsure and kind of scared, when he’d said, *Thanks. I haven’t really told anyone about this.*

“Yeah. He and I don’t get along,” Jonathan says, as though that’s the only thing that’s wrong with his and Lonnie’s relationship. “He used to be a real dirtbag to my mom. They’d get in fights all the time, and they were always his fault. And then he’d show up the next day after work with some expensive... *thing* he couldn’t afford, and he’d promise not to do whatever it was they were fighting about again. He was a goddamn liar, and he never apologized to her. Never.”

Steve is silent for a moment before he says, succinctly, “What a dick. I’m glad he got the fuck out of town.”

Jonathan huffs out a quiet laugh. “Yeah,” he agrees. “Me too.”

“So,” Steve says, and Jonathan finally tears his eyes away from the

glowing *change engine oil* light to look at him. “We cool?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan says, “we’re cool.”

A smile appears on Steve’s face then, one that stretches from ear to ear and crinkles up the corners of his eyes. Jonathan is caught off guard by it, the sincerity and realness in it.

“I’ve been thinking about what we can do about your problem,” Steve says, and he’s slipped back into that easy countenance so casually that Jonathan really is confident everything is - fine, actually. No strings attached, perfectly normal, and fine. “You can borrow my guitar for now, if you want, until you can get another one.”

Jonathan doesn’t see how that will work. “Don’t you need it?” he asks, frowning slightly.

“Mm, not really,” Steve says, shrugging. “I barely play nowadays, and I’m pre-*tt*y sure I can teach you without one. You’re not that good yet, Byers.”

Insults aside, it could work. If Steve is as good as he’s saying. Jonathan’s out of options at this point.

“That works,” he agrees. Steve claps him on the shoulder, squeezing once before letting go. “Be sure not to forget it tomorrow morning. I’m getting rusty.”

“I find your lack of faith disturbing,” Steve recites in possibly the worst Darth Vader impression Jonathan has ever heard, and Jonathan almost sighs because *of course* Steve would make a goddamn Star Wars reference.

Their conversation is easy on the way back to Steve’s; the radio is set to a murmur, a pleasant undercurrent to the casual topics. Until something by Queen begins to play, and Jonathan’s mind wanders to something Steve had said earlier that had been buried in the deluge of words:

He wants to play that song at his school’s talent show.

"Wait a minute," Jonathan says. "Will wants to play guitar by himself in front of the entire school?"

Steve, he can see in his peripheral, is staring guiltily at him. "Ah, hmm," he stutters, a hand raking anxiously through his hair. "He didn't tell you?"

Somehow, they fall back into their old routine as if nothing had ever happened. Jonathan supposes, in the grand scheme of things, nothing really did happen. Just an argument between friends, small and insignificant and easily forgotten.

Steve is waiting for him at 7:30 the next morning, guitar case in hand, and he stows it along Jonathan's back seat before climbing in the front.

"D'you think I could sit in on your practice sesh?" Steve asks, throwing Jonathan a look over the console. "Just to make sure my gear isn't missing anything, before everything closes."

"Sure," Jonathan agrees easily, because Steve is usually quiet and unobtrusive during those lunch hours. Sometimes he's even a little bit helpful, pointing out better ways that Jonathan might finger or phrase a passage.

"Cool cool," Steve murmurs, and the rest of the ride to school is spent in relative quiet; just them, the dim Hawkins morning, and Ray Davies singing half-heartedly to the beat.

The answering machine is beeping when they get to Steve's after school that day.

"Car's done. Yer total's one-thousand-four-hundred-twelve dollars an' fifty-six cents. Make sure you come pick it up by the end of the week or I'll have 'er scrapped." The mechanic sounds altogether too gleeful to be wringing every last penny he can out of Steve's pocket.

"That's, uh, wow," Jonathan says, staring at the answering machine. If he had a car that was that expensive to fix, well, he'd probably feel

about as good as Steve looks right now.

“Dad transferred the car to my name last month because he didn’t want to pay for the repairs anymore,” Steve says, staring at the answering machine box with a hollow quality to his expression. “Said he was teaching me a lesson for driving so recklessly. Did I ever tell you that I drove over a big chunk of ice and punched a hole in my oil pan right after the new year? I’m on my own for this one. *Fuck.*”

“But you can pay it, right?” Jonathan asks, because surely Steve hasn’t blown everything his father has ever given him.

Steve grimaces, but doesn’t reply.

“Steve,” Jonathan says, in the very slim chance Steve didn’t hear him.

“I’ll think of something,” Steve says, voice strained, so Jonathan decides not to push it. Steve jabs at one of the buttons on the answering machine; it stops mid-sentence of an old message, and Steve leads the way upstairs in silence.

Their lesson proceeds as it usually does: Jonathan shows Steve what he’s been working on, Steve corrects and adjusts and offers advice, Jonathan attempts to incorporate that into how he’s playing. Except -

Steve is staring at him again.

Jonathan has been able to ignore it for the better part - Steve is supposed to be watching him for mistakes anyway - but even during the breaks in playing, Steve’s gaze has been an enduring, intense constant.

Steve had been staring at him at lunch, too. At first, Jonathan hadn’t been sure. He’d thought that maybe he was imagining it, maybe he was being weirdly self-conscious. But Steve’s eyes had been trained steadily on him for the better part of ten minutes, and Jonathan didn’t know why, so he’d ignored it and simply continued repeating the exercises he’d been working on.

When he had dared to look up again he’d noticed Steve’s gaze fixed on his hands; Steve had noticed Jonathan, glanced up guiltily. He had

met Jonathan's gaze for a brief moment, and then finally, *finally* looked away.

"Everything good?" Jonathan had asked, because, what the hell was that?

"Yeah, everything's good," Steve had replied. He'd been fiddling with the corner of his napkin.

Jonathan had resumed practising; Steve had carefully kept his eyes trained on the floor.

And now Steve is staring at him again.

Jonathan finally has enough of it after stumbling over the same passage four times in a row: Steve's eyes, fixed on his hands again, wander from his fingers up his arm, pausing at his shoulder - he squints, then, lips parting in what Jonathan can only surmise is critical conviction. His frustration, mostly pointed inward thus far, boils over and outward and he snaps,

"What the hell are you looking at? Am I that shitty?"

Steve blinks, caught in the act, and then he nearly frowns; his eyebrows slant downward only slightly, his mouth opening just a degree further. "Oh, nah, man, I was just checking your fingering, and then I noticed you were sitting kinda...kinda like you have a stick up your ass, actually..." he fumbles, leaning away, wide-eyed, as though that will absolve him of his guilt. The image is so ridiculous that Jonathan's irritation melts a little and he shakes his head, smirking.

"Whatever you say," he mumbles, looking back to the music spread out in front of him, and tries playing that passage again.

After school the next day, they try to get Steve's car back from the shop. Steve is confident he can swing things in his favour. Jonathan isn't so sure.

Steve has been arguing with the mechanic since they arrived; this does nothing to alleviate Jonathan's doubts.

He'd been looking kind of clammy since Jonathan had pulled out of the school parking lot, but now he's absolutely white in the face, gesturing sharply between himself and his BMW. The old mechanic, clenching a lit cigar between his teeth and a dirty, oil-stained rag in one hand, does not look impressed.

Jonathan has been sitting in his own car with the windows up and music playing, so he can only imagine the words that are being exchanged. Steve, however, has begun to look more and more vexed, so with a sigh, Jonathan cuts the engine and opens the door.

"Listen, I've already told you I can pay *in installments* - I get paid weekly! I'm good for it!" Steve all but snarls, running a hand through his hair in irritation.

"An' what, I'm s'posed to just let you leave here without settlin' the bill?" the old man asks. "Not happening."

"Dude, do I *look* like I have that kind money on me?" Steve demands, and Jonathan wants to clap a hand over his friend's big mouth.

The mechanic runs a critical eye over Steve's attire, lingering pointedly on his Members Only jacket, before turning to look skeptically at his BMW. "Yes," he says flatly.

"Well guess what: I don't," Steve snaps, crossing his arms defensively. A deep red colour rises high on his cheeks, one that has nothing to do with the cold.

The mechanic grunts. "Hrm. Seems like you need a job."

"I'm in *high school*," Steve squawks indignantly, flapping a hand in the air.

"I've had a job since I was fourteen," Jonathan remarks drily, and Steve sends him a look that reminds him of Sissy Spacek going off the deep end in *Carrie*. He takes pity, just a little bit. "But I know for a fact you're paid weekly, so this shouldn't be a problem, right?" He turns an imploring look on the mechanic, who for some reason seems to like him, and visibly softens, just a little bit.

"How's this strike you," the mechanic says, apparently tiring of

tormenting Steve. "Ain't too often I get to look at a fancy Beemer up close an' personal, so I'll make the exception and let you pay in installments. *But*, that car ain't leaving this lot until the bill's settled."

Steve squints at the grease-covered old man. "Fine," he says stiffly. He snatches the invoice out of the mechanic's proffered hand, and pulls his wallet out.

Jonathan climbs back into his shitty Ford as Steve follows the mechanic into the shop's office. He only has to wait a few minutes before Steve re-emerges, looking oddly like a hen that's had its feathers ruffled out of place. He climbs into the car beside Jonathan, throws his BMW one last baleful look, and says,

"I hate to ask this, but...it's going to take me a while to pay that off."

"See you at 7:30 tomorrow?" Jonathan deadpans, and Steve snorts.

"Thanks," he says to the window, just as Jonathan is pulling out onto the road. "One day I'll learn how to stop fucking things up."

Jonathan isn't really sure what to say to that without making things worse, so he says nothing at all.

Steve remains subdued throughout the evening until Jonathan, casting about for *something* that will snap him out of it, recalls the cabinet he's spied in the sitting room once or twice.

"I noticed you have a pretty sweet record player downstairs. Got anything good?" Jonathan asks, and, just as intended, Steve's eyes begin to look a little more bright.

"I think even you'll be surprised," Steve says. He clambers off of his bed and begins shuffling through his messy closet, until he yanks on the handle of a bag that nearly sends the entire precarious ecosystem collapsing on top of him with its displacement. Steve slams the door closed before any real damage can be done. "I don't pull these out very often, so you should feel honoured."

"I can see that," Jonathan remarks coolly; Steve trips over a wayward pair of leather pants that had fallen out of the closet during his search, and then hauls his find to the door. Jonathan packs his things

up before following, and by the time he reaches the sitting room on the first floor, Steve has already placed a record onto the player and is fiddling with the needle.

While Steve is busy messing with the cabinet's settings, Jonathan takes it upon himself to look through the rest of Steve's collection. A lot of the albums are mainstream, attractive artists and bands, and Jonathan thinks that it's typical of Steve, but not in a bad way. More, relieving, he supposes.

Whatever that means.

But then he reaches the bottom of the pile, and whatever nice things he'd been thinking about Steve immediately freeze in his mind. Over at the record cabinet, Billy Idol begins singing in his wannabe-Elvis voice; Jonathan is staring down at an ABBA *Greatest Hits* album. Beneath it is a second ABBA album - *Super Trouper*, his brain supplies helpfully - confusing him further.

"Steve," he says, unsure. At the other boy's noise of acknowledgement he continues. "Did you grab some of your mom's records by accident?"

"Uh, don't think so," Steve answers, shoving the protective paper back into the case.

Jonathan can barely believe it. "...ABBA?"

Steve whirls around then, a dark flush creeping across his cheeks at an alarming rate. He laughs shrilly, falsely, and takes on an affection of nonchalance. "Haha, wow, okay, looks like I did grab one of my mom's - two of my mom's - "

Jonathan flips over the *Super Trouper* album and reads out, so it's perfectly clear: "Property of Steve Harrington." It's printed in black sharpie. Steve groans.

"Okay, so they're mine," he admits explosively, and just like that, it's as if the dam has been broken. "Do you know how much my mom listened to ABBA while I was growing up? It was constant. *Constant*. Every day, Byers. I know more about ABBA than everybody in this

town combined, and you know what? I *like* it. I *love* ABBA.” He snatches the *Greatest Hits* album out of Jonathan’s hand, and before Jonathan can formulate a protest, swaps it out with the Billy Idol record.

The telltale strains of one of the pop group’s hits begins to play, offensively loud, and Jonathan can’t believe that Steve enjoys this, except Steve Harrington is always full of surprises, so why shouldn’t this be one of them? Steve sings along to the obnoxious song, never missing a lyric, and pretty soon after he starts dancing as well, and it’s ridiculous. It’s ridiculous, and charming, and Steve is pretending like one of the decorative candle’s he’s plucked from the nearby mantelpiece is a microphone, which makes everything even more silly.

“Dance with me, Byers!” Steve offers during the instrumental bridge, extending a hand to Jonathan. He shakes his head.

“No way,” Jonathan refuses.

“*GIMME, GIMME, GIMME, A MAN AFTER MIDNIGHT*,” Steve croons at the top of his lungs.

The absurdity of it all gets to Jonathan: he starts to laugh, and it must be contagious because Steve is laughing too, dancing in circles around Jonathan and wheezing so hard he can barely sing.

The song eventually ends and Steve starts singing along to the next one, but Jonathan vetoes that. No more ABBA tonight, thank you very much. They listen to a bit of Billy Joel’s *Piano Man* next, and when they get bored of that switch it out with The Cars.

They’re interrupted by the phone. It’s the first time Jonathan has ever heard it ring at the Harrington residence, and he doesn’t know why the sound is so odd to him. He’s called several times; of course the Harringtons would have a phone.

Steve pops his head back into the sitting room. “It’s your mom,” he says, and Jonathan checks his watch. He curses under his breath, and follows Steve back into the hall.

“Hey, hon,” his mom says.

“Hey,” he says back, a little sheepish. “Sorry, I lost track of the time.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I thought it might be something like that,” Joyce laughs. “Just be sure to call next time. Sounds like you boys are having fun though - are you staying over at Steve’s tonight?” She asks this easily, as though the idea that Jonathan might sleep over at Steve Harrington’s house isn’t foreign and weird, something that would never have even been thought of even a month ago.

“Uh, no, I’ll be home soon,” Jonathan says. “We were just goofing off anyway.”

His mom hums some sort of acknowledgement. “Drive safe, love you,” she reminds him.

“Love you too,” he says automatically, and doesn’t remember that Steve is standing beside him until he hangs up.

Steve doesn’t say anything; he’s looking at Jonathan with a peculiar light in his eyes, and when he turns away to return to the sitting room, Jonathan thinks he might spy something like envy.

On Wednesday, he’s pulled aside after class.

“Jonathan, can I talk to you for a minute?”

It’s Mr. Garrow, Jonathan’s middle-aged, greying photography teacher. He’s holding a brochure.

Jonathan likes Mr. Garrow, as much as he can like any of the faculty of the school. The older man has never felt the need to try and push Jonathan out of his comfort zone, as so many others have in the past, with the misguided notion that they need to help him make more friends. Mr. Garrow has always let Jonathan quietly do his own thing, and Jonathan appreciates that.

Mr. Garrow holds out the brochure. Printed across the top is FIFTH ANNUAL INDIANA STUDENT PHOTO COMPETITION with the subtitle, in slightly smaller print: YOUTH IN AMERICA. “You’re one

of my best students,” he says. “I know there’s not a lot of time before the deadline - the school never gives our department enough notice - but I think you could knock it out of the park. All the info you need is in there; you just need to give me your submission and the school takes care of everything else. The deadline’s the 25th; think about it, okay?”

Jonathan takes the brochure and turns it over in his hands. There’s a lot of mumbo-jumbo about potential opportunities and connections, and he’s about to politely decline, but the cash prize attached to first place catches his eye. Tickets to an exhibition and a free hotel room are nice, but with \$200 he could make a sizable dent in the house’s bills for this month, next month, and maybe even the month after.

Plus, a niggling little voice in the back of his mind says, Redfield’s is still open.

“Cool, thanks,” he says, to Mr. Garrow’s glowing approval. “I’ll definitely check it out.”

Thanks to Mr. Garrow’s interruption Jonathan is late to lunch, so when he arrives in the cafeteria it’s already packed, and he has to crane his neck to spot Nancy and Steve huddled near one of the walls. He shoulders his way through the crowd and sits down beside Nancy.

“Check this out,” he says, holding out the brochure so his friends can see. Steve and Nancy both scan the front page before Steve flips it open, whistling lowly at the listed winnings.

“Youth in America?” Nancy reads after flipping the brochure back closed, plastic fork paused suspended in the air. Her mouth is pinched in the way that it does when she doesn’t quite understand the assignment. “That’s...vague.”

“Yeah, good thing Hawkins has a lot of...youth,” Jonathan says; Steve dissolves into giggles. Nancy, ever the serious one, tries to hide her own smile for about five seconds before she joins in on the laughter.

“I can show you all the ‘cool people’ hangout spots,” Steve offers through a chuckle. “I mean, not that I’m welcome there anymore, but

we could probably get away with a couple pictures before they chase us off.”

“What, you want to come with?” Jonathan asks.

“Uh, yes,” Steve says, as though he thinks Jonathan is being particularly slow today.

“Why?”

“Tell me, Jonathan Byers, do *you* know where America’s youth likes to hang out in Hawkins, Indiana?”

“...The arcade,” he hazards.

“Christ, you try to take a picture in there and all you’ll get is some snot-nosed kids wiping their mucus all over the arcade boxes,” Steve chides, dismissing the idea.

“That’s America’s youth!” Jonathan defends himself.

Steve gives him a pitying look. “Fine, that can be one of the pictures you take. But where *else* does the youth of today like to hang out?”

Jonathan glances at Nancy, who shrugs. “The library?” he guesses.

“No!” Steve nearly shouts, dragging a hand down his face. “You and Nancy hang out at the library but that’s because, and no offense, you’re both giant nerds. No one else does that!”

“You dated a nerd,” Jonathan points out, and Steve fixes him with a look that’s bordering on *unhinged*.

“Yeah, and maybe I’ll do it again,” he says viciously. “Nerds are hot.”

Nancy chokes on the swig of apple juice she’d just been taking. The look in her eyes as she glares at Steve is one that Jonathan can only describe as *alarmed*, and Jonathan has a brief treacherous thought of, *oh, right, they’re flirting*; the expression on Nancy’s face as her and Steve stare at one another is a warning, Steve looks like he wants to shove his foot into his mouth, and Jonathan wonders how long they’ve been doing this without telling him.

It's - fine, he thinks. Steve and Nancy always were the better couple; they were practically *made* for each other. If he tells himself that enough times, maybe he'll start believing it.

"Anyway," Steve says, clearing his throat, and the weird moment passes. "I know where all the cool young people in this town hang out, so I'll be acting as your guide. Otherwise your picture will end up just being your brother and his friends playing DnD."

Steve is waiting for him after school, leaned against the hood of Jonathan's car. He holds out a hand, palm stretched upward, as Jonathan approaches, and then flaps his fingers impatiently when Jonathan doesn't seem to get it.

"Keys," he elaborates, wiggling his fingers. "You're keeping an eye out for *the perfect shot* or whatever it is you artists call it, right?"

Jonathan fishes his keys out of his pockets and hands them over. "Don't wreck my car," he warns jokingly, and Steve scoffs.

"I would never."

True to his word, Steve drives surprisingly cautiously, cruising well below the posted speed limit (Jonathan's glad there's no police cars roaming around for easy tickets today) and stopping periodically to point out the various groups of bored-looking teenagers smoking cigarettes or reading dirty magazines. At some point he even pulls into The Palace's parking lot; Jonathan slips inside, quickly takes a shot he knows is no good, and retreats from the chaos.

"How was it in there?" Steve asks, the very picture of innocence.

"Terrible," Jonathan replies. Steve pulls out of the arcade's parking lot.

Steve suggests Starcourt, and Jonathan turns the idea down. After the terrible lighting and uncomfortable claustrophobic atmosphere of the arcade, he'd rather avoid crowded indoor spaces for now.

"So, you and Nancy," Jonathan says. He doesn't know why he's broaching the subject, not really, and refuses to listen to the annoyingly correct voice in his head that's been whispering *jealousy*,

jealousy, since lunch.

“What about me and Nancy?” Steve asks, eyes focused on the road.

“I think it’s pretty great,” Jonathan lies.

“What the hell are you - *oh*,” Steve says, finally catching on. Jonathan doesn’t dare look at him. In his peripheral he can see Steve frown. “What, me and Nancy? I told you, man, it’s not like that.”

“Oh,” Jonathan says. “Just, at lunch you both seemed kinda...”

“That? No. Haha, no.” Steve’s countenance betrays any feigned amusement; he actually looks a little sick to his stomach. “I promise you, Nancy and I are never, ever, *ever* going to date again. I think she’s probably the coolest girl I’ve ever met - and that’s *it* - and she wants to beat the shit out of me all the time for being an idiot. If that helps.”

And...it does, actually. If Steve isn’t lying - and Jonathan doesn’t think he’s lying, *hopes* he isn’t lying - that means Jonathan has just been overthinking things again, per usual, and that’s better than the alternative.

They end up wandering the downtown strip, but Hawkins’ youth is incredibly boring, and Jonathan doesn’t find much of interest until they peek down the narrow alley beside the theatre. There’s a group of teenagers hanging around a mouldering pile of pallets, and they’re passing a fifth of vodka around; they send Jonathan and Steve a collective stink-eye before deciding they’re not worth their attention, and return to gulping down the clear liquid, pulling faces every now and then.

“It’s four,” Jonathan says in disbelief, quiet enough that the buzzed teenagers don’t hear.

“Youth in America,” Steve says by way of explanation.

Jonathan adjusts his focus, frames the slouching kids in a way that looks something a little less basic than *basic*, and takes a picture.

“WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT FOR,” one of the rowdier-looking

teens roars.

“SCHOOL PROJECT,” Steve yells back, but the group begins to approach them menacingly so he and Jonathan beat a hasty retreat.

“Did you used hang out in an alley like that?” Jonathan asks, leaning up against the graffitied wall of the shut-down florist shop, chest heaving as he catches his breath.

“Maybe,” Steve gasps, doubled over. A moment later he straightens. “Actually, I used to have a lot of fun with Tommy and Carol, just hanging out in random spots and talking shit about people. lame, right?”

“A little,” Jonathan agrees. At Steve’s offended squint he continues, “But you’re less lame now, so it’s cool.”

Steve snaps his mouth shut and crosses his arms. “Gee, thanks, man,” he grumbles, rolling his eyes.

They grab burgers and fries at the diner down the street. Steve orders a milkshake as well - chocolate, Jonathan notes - and then proceeds to ruin his fries by dipping them into the sweet dessert.

The last stop on Steve’s list of Cool Hangout Spots is Sunset Odeon: it’s the only drive-in theatre Hawkins has, which closes during the winter and apparently holds host to “a crazy amount of” bush parties during the off-season.

The entrance to Sunset Odeon is blocked off by an imposing and impassable gate, but Steve insists Jonathan pull over and park, so Jonathan pulls over and parks.

“One time,” Steve is telling him as they trudge through the mud towards the open field, “Tammy Thompson was so drunk that she puked, and then passed out in it. It froze to her jacket.” He snickers at the memory.

“And these parties were supposed to be fun?” Jonathan asks, earning himself a good-natured shove.

They round the final bend before the narrow road opens up to the

ticket gatehouses and the movie field beyond.

“Oh, Jesus, what the hell is that,” Steve murmurs.

The back of the movie screen must have been painted over last summer and the artwork - as well as its message - is impossible to miss from the outdoor theatre's entrance: Ronald Reagan has been depicted in the likeness of Uncle Sam, pointing finger and all, with the words, I WANT YOU TO HELP MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN emblazoned boldly along the bottom in a thick block letter.

“Man, *fuck* that guy,” Steve says emphatically as they approach the campaign propaganda. “I will never, in my life, vote for a complete shitstick like him. My parents both voted for him, because they're absolute dickheads. He basically told anyone who gets AIDS that they can go die, which, what the *fuck*, who says something like that? Plus, if I want to light up a joint now and then, I could go to jail, isn't that fucked?”

Steve has never struck Jonathan as particularly political. He's kind of delighted, if he's being honest with himself, to hear such an impassioned, *pissed off* rant from Steve over the current president. They're close enough to the mural now that Jonathan can see the flaking areas of paint. The sun has begun to dip low in the sky, promising dusk soon, and everything in the field is faintly glowing under the dying light.

Jonathan backs up as Steve, heedless of him, continues cussing out Reagan. He crouches low to the ground as Steve pulls in a deep breath.

“FUCK YOU, RONALD REAGAN,” Steve yells at the top of his lungs, thrusting his middle finger as close to the mural as his arm will let him, and Jonathan clicks the shutter.

There's something vaguely poetic, Jonathan thinks, about this. About Steve and the halo of golden light around him and his middle finger, and the vicious manner in which he tells Ronald Reagan where to go shove it.

Steve hears the shutter's *click* and whirls around, confused to see

Jonathan crouched a ways back, until understanding dawns across his features and he breaks into a smile. “Always working, huh, Byers,” he teases, hooking his hands into the pockets of his jacket, and if Jonathan catches a hint of bashfulness in his posture and tone he doesn’t comment on it.

Jonathan likes the time it takes to develop photos. The dark room is, well, dark, and it’s quiet, and there’s something very satisfying in the way his hands make the practised movements of preparing the solution and the lightbox, dipping the photo paper, and hanging the results.

And the results are pretty decent, considering he took them all in a day.

(The arcade shot is, as Steve predicted, a terrible mess, and Jonathan carefully does not develop that negative.)

On Friday at lunch, Steve finds Jonathan and Nancy in the singular study room the library at Hawkins High offers its student body.

“I knew you nerds would be in here,” he says as he takes a seat beside Nancy and pulls out his most definitely smuggled cafeteria lunch from his bag. Jonathan doesn’t know how the container of tomato soup didn’t end up coating Steve’s belongings. “Nancy’s been worrying about this test all week.”

Nancy ignores Steve and reads off one of her cards: “A covalent bond typically forms between what kind of elements?”

“Nonmetals,” Jonathan answers easily. “Homogeneous mixtures are also referred to as what?”

“Solutions,” Nancy says. Jonathan nods and shuffles that card to the bottom of the pile.

Steve eats in silence as Jonathan and Nancy throw questions back and forth (seriously, how did a *grilled cheese* not end up a sticky mess all over Steve’s gym shoes?) until Nancy is satisfied they’ve both got

a good enough handle on the material.

“By the way,” Nancy says, packing up her study materials, “you’re picking up Will tomorrow night around nine, right?”

Jonathan makes a sound that he hopes sounds like an affirmative; his head is currently ducked under the desk while he makes an attempt at shoving all of his school supplies back into his bag. When he pops back up, Steve’s eyebrows are knit together in curious confusion. “Why so late, don’t you guys usually do your thing on Saturdays?” he asks.

“Jenny begged me to switch shifts with her,” Jonathan explains. “She’s got a date with her boyfriend, or something.”

“So you’re working evenings tomorrow, is what you’re saying,” Steve says.

“Yes,” Jonathan agrees slowly.

“Which means you can totally party tonight,” Steve continues.

“No,” Jonathan disagrees quickly.

“Nance, you in?” Steve asks Nancy, ignoring Jonathan’s rejection.

Nancy shakes her head. “I’m studying with Tracy tonight. Bio test on Monday.”

“Looks like it’s just you and me, then, Byers,” Steve says, shrugging.

“I never said I’d go...”

“Look, just tell your mom you’re spending the night, I’m sure she’d be cool with it.”

“Yeah, that’s not the problem. I don’t want to be hungover tomorrow - I have a job, remember?”

“We’re not gonna overdo it, numbnuts, we’re gonna be *smart* about it!”

Jonathan gives Steve a measured look; he assesses the pros, and he weighs the cons, and in the end, between Steve's egging and Nancy's knowing smirk, he decides, fuck it, why not have a little fun?

"Fine," Jonathan says, and Steve pumps a fist in the air, triumphant, as Nancy lets her head fall into her hands at their antics.

Work crawls by that evening. Jonathan wants his shift to be over, and he's impatient for the clock to strike nine. He doesn't know why - he likes hanging out with Steve, but this anticipation, the knowledge of what's to come...it has him on edge, just a little bit. And, if he's being honest with himself, he's a little bit excited. The prospect of him and Steve, of a couple beers and some music? *What could go wrong*, he thinks to himself wryly.

What could go wrong.

Notes for the Chapter:

One time I drove over a chunk of ice and punched a hole into the oil pan of my sister's car. Don't do that.

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, huge thanks to [Kypros](#), who catches all my silly little continuity errors.

Please be aware of the updated tags for this chapter. There's some content that some may find distressing. Stay safe, and enjoy!

Jonathan is staring at the Harringtons' imposing front door. What he needs to do is simple: raise his arm, form a fist, and knock.

He doesn't do that. It's strange, he thinks. He's never had to knock before.

It's also stupid that he's standing here with his backpack slung over one shoulder and *not knocking* on the door in front of him. Who does he think is going to answer? Steve's parents aren't home. Jonathan hopes they aren't home. Shit, they aren't home, are they? He can hear a muffled beat and indiscernible vocals from inside; it sounds like something Steve would listen to.

Jonathan knocks on the door.

It swings open shortly after and Jonathan is greeted with an obnoxious eyeful of Steve Harrington in party mode, double-fisting two cans of Bud.

"Jonathan, my man," Steve says, ushering him inside with one Bud-laden hand. He passes one of the cans off to Jonathan and then noisily takes a slurp of his own. Jonathan clumsily shucks his shoes, careful of the open beer in his hand, and then follows Steve into the living room.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting. Jonathan isn't a party person. Never has been. The only party he ever went to he didn't *actually* go to, just ended up pulling a way-too-shitfaced Nancy out of the house and driving her home.

Steve's living room doesn't look like it's set up for any kind of party. It looks exactly like it always has, except now there's his bag of records leaning up against the coffee table and a box sitting off to the side.

"What's that?" Jonathan asks, gesturing with his beer at the box.

"That, my friend, is tonight's entertainment," Steve says, and drags it closer so Jonathan can see inside.

It's more records.

"Pick one," Steve offers, and wanders over to the record console to swap out the current album.

Jonathan begins flipping through the records in the box.

"It's all Bowie," he says. Not that he's complaining.

"Yeah," Steve replies, distracted as he tries to slot the vinyl in his hand into its sleeve. "Knew I had it around here somewhere. I had to do some digging to find it."

"Where was it?" Jonathan asks. He's already got a decent pile that he's picked out.

"Back of my closet," Steve answers. "I really gotta clean that thing out."

No kidding.

They decide on one of the albums to play, and Jonathan's not quite sure what he expected to happen next, but it's not himself and Steve Harrington sitting on one of the expansive, comfortable couches and just...chatting. He doesn't mind it, thinks he would probably prefer this over any alternative party activities, anyway. The beer has already begun to make him feel a little fuzzy around the edges; Jonathan doesn't drink much, doesn't ever really feel a desire to imbibe, so his tolerance is laughably low.

Steve is easy to talk to, like this. He holds the beer in his hand easily, taking a swig every now and then, and Jonathan can understand why

everyone was so crazy about going to his parties. Steve in his element is charming, charismatic, and confident, and perhaps it's the beer, or perhaps it's something else, but he looks just as interested in what Jonathan has to say, even agreeing enthusiastically at some points and then running off on tangents.

Sometimes he'll hum along to the music, or sing along quietly, but Jonathan doesn't feel interrupted or ignored, just...calm. Relaxed. Having fun.

"Man, Bowie is so cool," Steve says, a dreamlike quality to his voice. Bowie is currently telling them that they're face to face with the man who sold the world. Jonathan can relate - sometimes he'd like to sell the world, too. "He wears makeup and he paints his nails and you know what? He doesn't give a shit. He doesn't give a fuck what people think. How cool is that?"

"Pretty cool," Jonathan agrees.

"We could be cool like Bowie if we tried," Steve continues. "You know what? Fuck it, let's do it. Let's be cool like Bowie."

Jonathan raises an eyebrow at him. "Uh, how?"

"Be right back," Steve says, jumping to his feet, and then he's gone. Jonathan, sipping his beer, can hear him thundering up the stairs, and his heavy footfalls overhead. He returns a short while later, juggling various glass bottles and two more beer in his arms. He drops one of the beers in Jonathan's lap and then settles in across from him, dumping the little glass bottles to the floor. They clink brightly against the tile.

"What's that?" Jonathan asks, wary.

"Nail polish," Steve answers, wiggling his fingers. "Pick out a colour for me, and then I'll do yours."

So they're really doing this, Jonathan thinks. Okay, fuck it. They'll be cool like Bowie, at least for one night.

He takes another swig of beer and then picks out a deep, lustrous red for Steve. It's a dramatic colour that he thinks Steve will like, and this

confidence carries through until he twists off the cap and realizes he has no idea how to paint a single nail, let alone an entire hand. Let alone two hands.

He does his best. As it turns out, his best isn't very good. He would probably be better at this if he were sober, but he's not, and the alcohol buzzing pleasantly through his system is making it pretty difficult to keep the lacquered brush from touching Steve's skin. Once he's done he leans back and recaps the nail polish. He surveys his work for all of two seconds before he needs to stifle a laugh behind a hand. Steve's fingers look like they've been through a blender.

"What the fuck, dude," Steve says flatly, examining his butchered fingers. "I trusted you."

"Shouldn't have," Jonathan says, and hides his shit-eating grin behind another gulp of beer.

"I'll show you how to do it properly," Steve grumbles, and with his still-wet fingernails begins picking gingerly at the other bottles. After a moment he settles on a dark mauve, so he grabs Jonathan's hand and begins working.

Jonathan sips at his beer while Steve is hunched over his hand, noting idly that he's putting perhaps too much effort into the entire endeavour. Steve seems to agree; after he finishes one nail he leans back, stretching his neck, releasing a sigh at the small pops that accompany it.

"Man, fuck this. It's taking forever," he says, and Jonathan thinks maybe he'll be spared a full set of painted nails, but Steve doesn't let go of his hand, instead leaning back over and continuing to paint.

Steve doesn't put in as much effort into the rest of Jonathan's nails. In fact, Jonathan suspects Steve is putting in almost no effort at all, and his suspicions are proven correct by the time Steve caps the nail polish bottle with a smug little twist of the lid. Jonathan's hands don't look much better than his.

"Wow," he says, unimpressed, and Steve throws a pillow at him.

At least his paint is purple, and not a bloody shade of red.

“Now we wait,” Steve says sagely. He shakes his beer can and frowns at it. “I’m empty. You want another one?”

“Sure,” Jonathan agrees easily. While Steve is in the kitchen he flips the record to the B-side, careful of the stodgy lacquer on his hands. He doesn’t know what he’d do if he ruined the Harringtons’ expensive record player. Die, probably. It would be a better outcome than meeting Steve’s parents again, at the very least.

Steve appears in the archway soon after, pinching two beer cans delicately between his thumbs and forefingers.

“How long does it take for them to dry?” Jonathan asks, accepting the beer from Steve as the other boy resumes his seat across from Jonathan. Steve shrugs.

“Dunno. Mom usually did hers while watching TV. Sometimes she’d do her feet too, and stick cotton balls between her toes so they didn’t end up like this,” Steve says, wiggling his fingers again. Jonathan rolls his eyes.

“We’re not painting our toes.”

“*Let’s dance,*” Bowie sings, and Jonathan thinks that might not actually be such a bad idea this time, not now that he’s kind of drunk and kind of happy and kind of thinking he’d like to dance with Steve, if Steve asked.

Steve doesn’t ask. He holds his beer daintily between his thumb and forefinger, sips out of it while chatting with Jonathan, and makes a motion like he’d like to run his hand through his hair before realizing what a bad idea that is.

The beer is warm in Jonathan’s gut, and that warmth spreads to his arms and his legs, his fingers and toes, his cheeks.

“I want nachos,” Steve announces. Jonathan thinks that’s an excellent idea. Their nails are probably dry enough for that.

They pick themselves up off the floor, leaving the glittering bottles of

nail polish behind, and, wobbling a little, make their way to the kitchen. Jonathan fiddles with the oven settings while Steve pulls out a metal baking tray as well as the tortilla chips and a bag of pre-shredded cheese. He spreads the chips evenly across the tray and then overturns the entire bag of shredded cheese onto them, mumbling a low, “oops,” as some falls to the floor.

The Harringtons’ kitchen opens into the dining room, where he can spy the family portraits dotting the walls.

“Do your parents ever come home during the weekends?” Jonathan asks, and maybe it’s rude, but the alcohol is making him a little more direct, a little more forward. Steve doesn’t look like he minds the question, anyway. He just shrugs.

“Nah,” Steve says. “I mean, sometimes, but basically never. I get free reign of the house all weekend, every weekend. Woo, lucky me.” He doesn’t sound like he thinks he’s very lucky. He finishes spreading the cheese a bit more evenly over the chips, and then roots around in the fridge for some salsa, adding that to the mess. The oven beeps, signalling the end of the preheat phase.

“I’m glad they’re never here,” Steve continues, smearing some salsa over the cheese. Jonathan can’t tell whether he’s lying or not. “All they want to do is...mold me into some sort of carbon copy of them, or something. And, like, you’ve met them. My parents *suck* . I mean...okay, my mom isn’t the worst, but she’s not great, y’know? And my dad? My dad sucks. He sucks so bad.” He pulls over one of the bar stools that had been lining the walls - the ones that Jonathan figured were just for decoration - and sits on it.

“My dad sucks too,” Jonathan supplies. “You already knew that. Everyone knows that. But he sucks.”

“Your dad does suck,” Steve agrees. “Dads in general just suck. I don’t know anyone who actually *likes* their dad, and El doesn’t count. Hopper is...”

“Hopper,” Jonathan finishes for him, and doesn’t point out that Lucas’s family is perfectly functional and nuclear and that his dad is actually kind of *nice* . He pops the tray of nachos into the oven and

sets the timer for five and a half minutes, and then slides his back down the cupboard until he's sitting. Steve, apparently not content with sitting so high above him, hops off the stool, leaving it where it is, and sits as well, leaning against the opposite wall.

"Yeah. Fuckin' Hopper. At least if Hopper was my dad he'd keep the fridge stocked."

"What?" Jonathan asks, because he can't fathom the idea of the Harringtons - sleek, boastful, new-money type of people that they are - having an empty refrigerator.

Steve blows out a puff of air that ruffles his already-floppy fringe. "Eighth grade, they went on a week-long trip to Mexico or something, and mom forgot to pick up groceries before they left. I had to call my grandma to get some money wired over."

"Jesus," Jonathan breathes. "I bet she was pissed."

"Sorta," Steve shrugs, shoulders bunching up close to his ears before falling in a hollow movement. He flops backwards so he's lying on the floor, staring up at the high kitchen ceiling. "She was more annoyed that she had to go to the bank."

"What the fuck," Jonathan says.

There were times when they were younger, times where Lonnie got fall-down drunk for days on end, missing work and pissing all their money down the drain with that day's alcohol. And then his mom would work herself ragged while waiting for her husband to finish his latest bender, putting in more and more hours at Melvald's until she was stretched so thin she had nothing left to give, and Jonathan would come home and pretend he couldn't see Lonnie passed out on the couch. Pretend he couldn't hear his mom sobbing in the bathroom.

And still, it wasn't enough. There was never enough to go around whenever Lonnie decided the bottle was more important than feeding his children.

Perhaps it's the beer, or perhaps it's the strange sense of solidarity

Jonathan feels with Steve in this moment, or perhaps it's the way Steve is watching him, but Jonathan leans back against the cupboard door and says, "I came home from work one night a few years ago and found my mom holding a knife, and Lonnie was gone. I thought - I was *sure* Lonnie was dead."

"Your mom tried to kill your dad?" Steve asks in disbelief.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Why?"

Jonathan levels a measured look at Steve. "Because it's Lonnie," he says, feeling flat and hollow. "He's always been a piece of shit, and him and my mom were always fighting. And he'd always try to win her over afterwards by buying her something nice, and it usually didn't work, but sometimes it did, and that just pissed me off so goddamn much because *he* was always the one being an asshole but he never told her he was sorry for all the shit he put her through. But he would always give her shit he couldn't afford and promise her that this time he would change, and do better, and *be* better, but he never did. He never even tried. And then the fighting got so bad that one day I came home from work and all of the shit Lonnie had ever bought for my mom and all of Lonnie's stuff - or what he had left behind - was in the front yard, and our car was gone. So I went inside and my mom was sitting on the couch just staring at the door, and she was holding a knife in her hand. I had to open her fingers one by one to make her drop it because she was gripping onto it so tightly. And then I realized I didn't know where Will was, so I asked her, but she couldn't answer me because as soon as she'd let go of the knife she'd begun crying.

"So I ran to Will's room. I don't think I've ever run that fast in my life. The door was open. I looked under his bed but he wasn't there, and that's when I started calling out for him. I guess that's when he finally took his hands off of his mouth, because I heard him crying in the closet, and then I found him curled up in the back corner. He's never told me what happened that day except that mom told Lonnie to get out."

Jonathan is staring up at the ceiling, head tipped back to rest against

the wood behind him. He's not looking at Steve, hasn't been looking at Steve since he started talking and then found he couldn't stop. He spoke to his reflection in the glossy brass fittings of the overhead fan, and he hadn't dared glance over to Steve's reflection. He doesn't dare now.

"Shit," Steve says. He blows a noisy breath through his lips.

"Shit," Jonathan agrees. Steve is frowning; Jonathan can see it in the ceiling fan's reflection. "I took all his crap to the thrift store the next day. Spent all morning arguing with Jeremy over it."

This finally makes Steve's dour expression clear somewhat. "I bet," he murmurs, and then he rolls onto his side so he's facing Jonathan, peering at him through the tangle of chair legs between them. "Sorry, man. I didn't mean to drag all that shit back up."

Jonathan shrugs. "It's fine," he says. "Happened a long time ago."

"Still pretty fucked up, though."

"Yeah."

"I'd be pissed."

"I was. I am."

"But everything's fine?"

"Because it has to be," Jonathan says, the words heavy on his tongue. It has to be fine, because otherwise what would it be? Jonathan doesn't want to contemplate that right now. "Sorry. Can we talk about something else now?"

"Yeah. The floor's getting cold anyway." Steve pulls himself up to a sitting position and then surges to his feet, offering Jonathan an unsteady hand. They both wobble a bit as Jonathan is dragged to his feet. "Christ, this is supposed to be a party."

"Not like I know what a party's supposed to be like anyway," Jonathan points out, and Steve laughs.

“Sorry.” Steve swings the fridge door open and tosses another can to Jonathan. “Not like two people is much of a party anyway. Just a - a...” He scrunches up his forehead, searching for the word.

“Hang out,” Jonathan supplies. “Er. Hanging out. That’s what we’re doing.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, as though that hadn’t occurred to him.

The timer on the stove begins to chime, and Jonathan remembers why they were in the kitchen in the first place.

“Fuck yeah, nachos,” Steve says, and just like that the awkward, heavy air dissipates. He retrieves the nachos from the oven and begins scooping them messily onto the large serving platter. “You know what goes with nachos?”

“What?”

“ABBA.”

“No,” Jonathan says. He doesn’t know what else to say in response to that. ABBA does not go with anything.

The nachos are pretty good. Jonathan is surprised how well they go with the beer. They spill some of the chips on the floor - Steve scoops them up while Jonathan makes a disgusted face - and by the time the platter is mostly empty, Jonathan is content to simply sit and listen to the end of the album - Billy Idol now, at Steve’s insistence, lest they burn themselves out on Bowie before the end of the night, something Jonathan had tried fruitlessly to argue against - until the needle begins to scratch ineffectively at the inside of the vinyl.

Steve, however, has different plans.

He claps his hands together twice, sending nacho crumbs flying, and then he’s on his feet, pulling Jonathan up after him. “Time to get this show on the road,” Steve announces.

“What show?” Jonathan asks, while Steve is half-dragging him towards the staircase.

"Gotta complete our Bowie makeover," Steve says, which does not clear things up in the slightest. Jonathan's confusion continues as Steve pulls him past his room towards the end of the hall and into what must be the master bedroom.

"What are you doing?" Jonathan asks, because Steve has let go of his wrist and is now rooting around on his mother's vanity.

"Looking for Bowie colours," Steve mumbles, distracted, so Jonathan lets him make a mess of the vanity until he's apparently satisfied, brandishing several pots and tubes of makeup. "I'm thinking *Aladdin Sane* for me and *Life on Mars* for you. You'd look pretty sick in blue."

"Sure," Jonathan agrees, because he's pretty drunk and any suggestion Steve makes seems very easy to say yes to. "But I'm not doing it in your parents' bedroom."

"Fair."

So they stumble back into the hall and to Steve's bedroom, nearly tripping onto the bed because Steve left out his cassette player near the door.

"Hold this up for me," Steve orders, handing Jonathan a hand mirror. "Gotta see what I'm doing."

He gets as far as applying his foundation - poorly, Jonathan notices - and making a start on his eyeliner, but Steve is unskilled and he keeps poking the tip of the eyeliner pencil way too close to his eyeball for comfort on more than one occasion. So Jonathan - for the benefit of Steve, he tells himself - lowers the mirror, ignores Steve's squawk of protest, and snatches the pencil from his hand before he can actually inflict any damage.

"You're going to poke your eye out," Jonathan admonishes, before Steve can really get himself worked up. "Here, let me do it."

"You don't even know what you're doing," Steve complains.

"Sure I do," Jonathan lies. "I watch my mom doing her makeup all the time."

"Somehow that doesn't make me feel better," Steve mutters, but dutifully looks up towards the ceiling - "With your eyes only, I said!" - when Jonathan directs him to.

They didn't bring any reference pictures with them, so Jonathan is really just guessing at what the hell he's supposed to be doing. It's been a while since he's looked at his *Aladdin Sane* vinyl but he's... *pretty* sure he remembers what Bowie looks like on the cover of it.

He tries to fix Steve's awful foundation job, and then tries to fix his botched eyeliner job (Steve had gone rather heavy-handed with it while Jonathan is fairly certain the emphasis was on the eyeshadow), and once he realizes he's not a great artist and the eyeshadow he's dusted over Steve's eyes look more like angry rashes, he gives up with that and decides, fuck it, time to paint a gigantic red lightning bolt across Steve Harrington's face. He can't possibly make this look any worse. Lacking any proper face paint, he settles on one of the ruby red tubes of lipstick Steve's mom seems to favour, and then smears a shaky blue outline on one side with something labeled "colour corrector."

Steve is surprisingly patient and obedient during the process. He tilts his head easily under Jonathan's touch, closes his eyes when Jonathan asks, and doesn't even scrunch his face up once Jonathan starts dragging the lipstick over his forehead and cheek.

Jonathan finishes by carefully applying some mascara, and when he leans back to inspect his work, he can't help but snort out a laugh.

"What?" Steve asks, blinking blearily through the clumpy mascara. "*What did you do to my face, Byers ?!*"

"Nothing," Jonathan defends himself, holding up his hands in defense. Steve snatches the hand mirror from the bed, and has the good grace to consider his look, turning the mirror this way and that in front of his face before pulling an affronted expression. "Just, you look awful," Jonathan continues, surprised at what a bad job he's done. "I wish I'd thought to bring my camera - this *needs* to be immortalized."

"Gee, thanks. Good to know my axe murderer look is complete,"

Steve grumbles, rolling his eyes. He tosses the hand mirror back on the bed and huffs out an amused sigh, ruffled feathers apparently settling. A thought strikes him. "Wait a minute, I think I've got a shitty old polaroid kicking around my closet. One sec."

He launches himself off the bed in a spur of energy and somehow isn't buried by the deluge of *stuff* that falls out of the closet when he opens the door. After a minute of rifling through his belongings, Steve turns triumphantly with a dinged-up old polaroid camera clutched firmly in his hands. He tosses it to Jonathan and resumes his rifling.

"You're supposed to keep the film in the fridge," Jonathan supplies, once Steve tosses that over to him too.

"Yeah, okay," Steve says, "because I'm a big camera nerd like you."

Jonathan ignores him in favour of slotting one of the squares of film into the camera. Once ready, he lifts it to his eye and adjusts the focus.

"Say 'cheese,'" Jonathan deadpans, and snaps the shutter of the polaroid as Steve does just that, pulling his lips back from his teeth and squinting in an exaggerated, ridiculous impression underneath the dim, awful lighting.

"How long does that need to stay in there?" Steve asks as Jonathan deposits the square of film in his desk drawer, closing it tightly.

"About fifteen minutes," Jonathan says, and when he turns back to Steve the other boy is brandishing several makeup containers in a worrying fashion.

"Perfect," Steve mumbles, because he's gotten very much in Jonathan's space and saying it any louder than that would have been *too* loud, Jonathan feels. Maybe Steve felt that way too.

Steve pokes his tongue out between his teeth and lips when he's concentrating. Jonathan had never noticed before - had never had a reason *to* notice. But now Steve is dragging a foamy sponge across Jonathan's skin, and now Steve's hand is resting against Jonathan's

cheek as he draws a smudgy line across his eyelid, and now Steve is holding Jonathan's chin in his hand as he pulls the tube of lipstick over first one lip, and then the other, and all throughout Steve's tongue is peeking out between his lips.

The process of putting on makeup isn't a pleasant one by any stretch - especially not with Steve at the helm - but all too soon Steve leans back and says, smugly, "Done."

Jonathan grabs the handheld mirror.

"What the fuck," he says to his reflection, and Steve gasps, affronted.

"What do you mean, *what the fuck*," Steve hisses. "I did an amazing job. *Look* at what you did to me and my fingers." He waves the offending fingers in Jonathan's face to emphasize his point.

Jonathan wouldn't call the makeup job Steve has done *amazing* by any stretch: his lipstick is smudged at the corners of his mouth, the foundation Steve had taken such pains to apply looks horribly uneven, and Steve must have given up trying for a sharp look with his eyes, because it looks like he's been punched out twice over. He doesn't know where the eyeliner ends and the eyeshadow begins. And yet, somehow...

"It's Bowie, I guess," Jonathan concedes, and Steve punches the air with a *whoop*. He ends up falling over backwards, banging his head on the desk.

"Ow, fuck."

That reminds Jonathan - he leans over and pulls the desk drawer open, plucking the polaroid from it and giving it a couple dramatic waves in the air.

It's a bad photo. It's a very bad photo. Steve's eyes are closed and his smile looks more like a grimace, not to mention the expired, improperly-kept film and horrible lighting combining to give the entire thing a weirdly unsettling and slightly fuzzy atmosphere.

Jonathan likes it. He doesn't know whether anyone else has ever seen Steve Harrington like this - goofing off, unguarded, smeared with

layers of makeup, looking horrible. He might be the only one.

“Oh, christ, we’re burning that,” Steve says, and makes to snatch the photo from Jonathan’s fingers.

“Nope,” Jonathan says, pulling it out of Steve’s reach. “I’m keeping it.”

Steve’s face scrunches up. “Why?”

“Dunno,” Jonathan lies, shrugging, and slips the photo into his back pocket.

Their makeovers complete, they traipse back downstairs to where Billy Idol is moaning about some girl or other.

“I’ve had enough of you,” Steve says to Billy Idol, retrieving the record and, thankfully, replacing it with another of Bowie’s. Then he grabs himself and Jonathan another beer.

The music is good, the beer is good, Jonathan’s stomach is full and his face is full of makeup, and his heart is full of fondness for the ridiculous-looking boy sitting at the other end of the couch, gesticulating wildly with his hands as he tells Jonathan about the time he was Dustin’s wingman to the middle school’s Snow Ball.

“Dude, I’m sorry,” Steve says, apropos of nothing. This is a hard left from the discussion of the Farrah Faucet spray he’d apparently spritzed into Dustin’s hair last year.

“Um, okay,” Jonathan says, perplexed. “For what?”

Steve blows out air dramatically between his lips, ruffling his already-ruffled fringe. “Uh...everything?”

“I’m not sure I follow,” Jonathan says. “I’m not mad about the camera or anything anymore.”

“No, not that,” Steve corrects him patiently. “I meant about...like, everything. Before. When we weren’t friends.”

Oh. Jonathan’s not sure he wants to talk about this right now. He’s

already had one heart-to-heart with Steve tonight; he's not sure whether he can handle another.

Steve is still talking. "I was such a fuckin' douche to you, man, and for what? Because everyone thought you were a weirdo?"

"I am a weirdo," Jonathan argues.

"Yeah, but, like, you're a *cool* weirdo," Steve argues back.

Jonathan is oddly flattered. "Thanks...?"

"You're welcome. Anyway, I'm sorry for being such a dickhead to you, and your brother. Can't believe it took me this long to realize that the Byers are pretty alright."

"You're pretty alright, too," Jonathan shoots back, and Steve, for the second time since Jonathan has gotten to know him, blushes. He pretends not to see it. "And...I'm sorry for being a creep," Jonathan continues. "You had every right to be pissed at me for taking those pictures."

"Didn't have you break your camera, though," Steve says.

"No," Jonathan agrees. "But you made up for it. And I guess I'm sorry for giving you a concussion, but not for beating the shit out of you. If that makes sense."

This makes Steve laugh. "Fair," he concedes. "I deserved that one." He stifles a yawn behind his hand. Jonathan checks his watch. It's very late, or...early, he should say.

Steve has begun to munch on their leftover nachos, but now that Jonathan has realized he's tired he's finding it hard to keep his eyes open.

"Time for bed," Steve says somewhere to his left, and then a pile of pillows and blankets are dropped onto Jonathan. "You can use the couch by the window."

Jonathan slowly gets himself settled, and notices that Steve has nestled himself into the other couch, the one littered with nacho

crumbs.

“Aren’t you going to go upstairs?” he asks, the words refusing to coordinate with his sluggish tongue.

“Nah. Too much effort.”

“This is going to be a pain to get off in the morning.” Jonathan is wiping at the greasy makeup on his face. He hopes he doesn’t smear it too badly on his pillow.

“Ugh, I know. I take it back,” Steve mumbles. “I don’t want to be cool like Bowie anymore. Too much work.”

“I don’t think you actually ever reach his level of cool anyways,” Jonathan says in consolation.

He can see Steve nodding sagely, as if this is the obvious conclusion. “It’s because you painted my nails to make me look like an axe murderer.”

“You didn’t do much better,” Jonathan reminds him, and Steve snorts sleepily.

“Man, we kinda suck,” he slurs, and Jonathan would agree with him except that his eyelids feel heavy and his lips don’t seem to want to cooperate.

“ *I’m only dancing,* ” Bowie hums, and Jonathan spies Steve’s arm flopping up to grab at the needle, pulling it off of the record before feeling around for the on/off switch. The record player clicks off with a dull *thunk* and Steve mumbles something under his breath that Jonathan doesn’t catch.

The world is spinning. Jonathan is spinning, too. His thoughts are a whirl inside his head, and as he’s pulled into sleep he thinks, *We’re on top of the world* .

Jonathan does not feel on top of the world when he wakes up the next morning. He feels hungover.

The Harringtons' house has large, east-facing windows in the living room, and by Steve's groan Jonathan can guess he's noticed this in the same manner Jonathan has. He rolls over and tries to bury his face into the couch to escape the bright morning sunlight. It doesn't help.

"Water," Steve mumbles, somewhere to Jonathan's left. "Why didn't we drink *water* ..."

"Ugh," Jonathan says into the couch cushions.

He doesn't know how he does it, but he manages to roll off of the couch, wander into the kitchen, and fill two glasses with water before shuffling back into the living room. Steve has a hand over his eyes upon his return, so Jonathan gingerly places the glass beside his head before sitting back on the couch. His throat is parched; the stale flavour of beer is coating his cheeks and teeth and tongue. He sips at the water, grateful to get the taste out of his mouth.

"Do you want a straw?" he asks, since Steve hasn't touched his own glass.

"Ngh," Steve grunts, so Jonathan slinks back to the kitchen, finds a package of straws in one of the cupboards, and drops one into Steve's cup.

"I'm going to make breakfast," Jonathan says. Steve gives him a limp thumbs up.

There's an open packet of bacon in the fridge, and half a carton of eggs, so Jonathan sets to work making a classic hangover cure breakfast.

Strange, he thinks, as the bacon begins to sizzle and he fishes a couple of slices of bread out of its bag. Strange that he's cooking this meal for Steve, and not Lonnie, and that he doesn't mind it.

There was always a simmering resentment burning in his gut, whenever he woke up and heard the telltale chainsaw snore from the living room indicating Lonnie came home at god-knows-what-hour. It simmered and it simmered and it came close to boiling over, once or

twice, whenever Lonnie yelled at him for “banging around the kitchen at the ass-crack of dawn,” or for overcooking the eggs. As though Jonathan wasn’t doing this for *his* benefit, so he could maybe think about going to work that day so that Joyce wouldn’t have to cut the moldy corners off of the cheese *again* that night.

But it’s Steve lying on the floor of the living room, and he’s still got that bright red lightning bolt painted on his face, and he won’t yell at Jonathan for cooking. So Jonathan cooks, and he sort of enjoys it, hangover aside.

He burns the toast a little, so he slathers the butter on extra thick. Depending on Steve’s state, he might not even notice it.

Steve shambles into the kitchen just as Jonathan is filling two glasses with orange juice - EXTRA PULP, the jug had advertised - and his eyebrows shoot up at the spread on the table. He seems almost rejuvenated; Jonathan attributes that to the empty water glass clutched in his hand.

“Damn,” Steve whistles, and drops into a chair. “I should invite you over more often, Byers. Usually I just heat up a frozen pizza in the microwave.”

Jonathan stares at him. “What?” he asks. “I’m sorry - you cook your frozen pizza in a *microwave* ?”

Steve shrugs. “It comes out kinda soggy, but it’s alright.”

“There are warnings about doing that. You could get food poisoning,” Jonathan points out. He sits in the chair opposite Steve. Suddenly his scrambled eggs don’t seem too appetizing.

“Haven’t yet,” Steve argues. “Plus, the oven takes too long.”

“Would you even know?” Jonathan says, and at Steve’s confused look, continues, “I mean, when you’re so hungover that you’re - *microwaving* a pizza. Would you even know if you had food poisoning at that point?”

Steve pokes at a slice of bacon with his fork. “Probably not,” he agrees easily. He pops the bacon into his mouth and chews

thoughtfully. "This is way better than pizza."

Jonathan starts eating his own breakfast and tries not to think of microwaved frozen pizza, and the sea of water that must have been on Steve's plate after that travesty.

He doesn't notice that Steve hasn't eaten much until he looks up and sees him piling everything onto his saturated, burnt toast.

"Something wrong?" Jonathan dares to ask. Steve knocks his pile of scrambled eggs off the toast.

"No," Steve says. He puts his fork down, pulls in a breath. "Just thinking about - well - I've been thinking lately. So you know how Bowie is, right? Like, he doesn't differentiate between genders, or whatever, right? I was thinking - what if I'm the same?"

Jonathan can't breathe. Is this - is Steve - is this what he thinks it is? Steve Harrington, hungover, covered in smeared, terrible makeup, eating bacon and eggs that Jonathan just cooked for him, *coming out* ?

He realizes he hasn't said anything, and Steve has been waiting - waiting for what? What does he want Jonathan to say? Jonathan doesn't know what to say.

He stays silent for too long. Steve hasn't been looking at him, has been staring down at his plate this entire time, but something in his posture shrinks even as he stands with his full plate, mumbling "never mind," as he walks it over to the sink.

"In freshman year I had a crush on Tony Mancuso," Jonathan blurts. Steve freezes in the motion of scraping his uneaten food into the garbage. "I never told him. I never told anyone. I - " and here Jonathan stops himself short, because if he keeps talking he will say something that can't be taken back. Steve has placed his plate on the counter and has turned back towards Jonathan, something strange and bright in his eyes. Whatever that is, that curious light, it spurs Jonathan on. "I don't think I like girls. In general."

Steve cocks his head to the side, brow furrowing in confusion. "Uh,

Nancy?" he says, the words lilting upwards near the end.

Jonathan shrugs. "I don't know. I liked her, but I - " he's about to say that he never liked her like he likes Steve, which would be a colossal fuck-up, even for Jonathan.

Steve is nodding, though, like he understands. Maybe he does. But Steve loved Nancy in a way Jonathan was never able to, loved her so brightly and so fiercely that Jonathan was envious of it, envious that he couldn't replicate it. So maybe Steve doesn't understand what Jonathan means. Jonathan doesn't know.

"Well, shit," Steve says, blowing a puff of air up at his fringe. "I, uh, well, I didn't expect this conversation to go in this direction but hey, cool."

Jonathan quirks an eyebrow at Steve.

"I wasn't just going to assume, dude! You dated Nancy for like two months!"

"Oh, wow, two whole months," Jonathan remarks drily. "That means I love vagina forever."

"Dickhead," Steve says fondly, and Jonathan's chest jolts uncomfortably at the familiarity of it. Then, with barely-concealed amusement, Steve asks, "Tony Mancuso?"

Tony Mancuso is in Steve's year - a handsome, dark-haired fellow whose good looks were ruined the moment he'd opened his mouth. Jonathan tells Steve so.

"Jesus," Steve says, once his laughter subsides. He wipes at his eye and then sobers, expression taking on a solemnity that Jonathan can almost believe is genuine. "Harrison Ford," he says, very seriously. Nothing else, just, *Harrison Ford*.

Jonathan recalls suddenly the two Star Wars and Indiana Jones posters he'd spotted in Steve's bedroom, and Harrison Ford's prominence on both.

He would like to say that it seems a little obvious in retrospect,

except it doesn't. Steve still has pinups taped to his wall - posters featuring busty, attractive women with impossibly large hair and impossibly thin figures.

Still, Harrison Ford makes sense, in a way. Jonathan can see it.

"John Cougar," he says, and then shoves a fork-full of eggs in his mouth so he doesn't have to respond to Steve's incredulous shout.

"You listen to *John Mellencamp* ?!" Steve demands.

"No!" Jonathan protests, affronted. Then, sheepishly, he says, "Just...just Jack and Diane." He doesn't mention the VHS tape under his bed, the one he'd used to tape over that SCTV skit a couple of years ago and only ever dared to watch when he was certain he was alone in the house. He doesn't mention how he would pause whenever John Cougar stepped in to help Miss Purdy - running a hand through his perfectly, stupidly coiffed hair and throwing Miss Purdy a smile - and then rewind and play it all over again. How he would pretend John Cougar was looking at him.

"You shit on me for listening to mainstream crap all the time," Steve says, squinting beadily at him. "But you listen to *John-fucking-Mellencamp* ."

"Only Jack and Diane!" Jonathan splutters, indignant. He brings his empty plate to the sink to avoid Steve's judgmental stare, and scratches at his itchy cheek. "Can I use your shower?" he asks, because his fingers come away a peachy-orange colour and he's beginning to feel pretty gross.

Steve seems to recall the obscene amount of makeup caked on his face then; he swipes his thumb over his eye and pulls a face at the red and blue paint that comes off on it.

Jonathan showers first, rubbing his face nearly raw in an attempt to remove the oily makeup, and then starts on cleaning up the remnants of the previous night while Steve takes his turn, feeling slightly better now that his face is clean and he's changed out of last night's clothes. He's momentarily surprised to find the kitchen cleaned and the dishes sitting in the dish rack, washed, but he pushes that surprise down in

favour of something warmer, something nicer.

The beer cans smell awful, and Jonathan can't believe the amount of cheese they'd dumped onto their plate of nachos, much less how much of it had managed to make its way onto the floor. He folds up the linens Steve had tossed him the previous night, and Steve emerges from the bathroom just as Jonathan is sweeping some wayward tortilla chips out from under the couch. He whistles lowly.

"Damn, you're even cleaning. You're the best house guest I've ever had, Byers," he says, impressed, and then grabs the folded linens, bringing them over to the laundry room.

"Don't get used to it," Jonathan calls to Steve's retreating back.

They get the house looking more or less presentable by the time Jonathan needs to leave for work, and they even have time to frantically scrub the nailpolish from their fingernails; him and Steve work surprisingly well when they're feeling too under the weather to gripe back and forth. Jonathan wonders what's ahead of them, once he steps out the front door. Do they go back to how they used to be? Can they?

How would they go back, Jonathan wonders. How *could* they go back?

The thought makes him feel a bit queasy, so he stops thinking about it. He packs his things instead, and tries not to notice that Steve follows him out into the driveway.

The crisp, late March air feels good on Jonathan's face. Feels good for his headache. He stands for a minute, letting himself just breathe, and then turns to say goodbye.

Steve looks like he wants to say something; Jonathan can tell by the serious set to his jaw, the way his eyebrows furrow as he thinks. Jonathan can hazard a guess on what Steve wants to say, but he doesn't know how long it will take Steve to figure out *how* to say it, and if he doesn't go now he really will be late for work, so he saves Steve the trouble and says,

“I won’t tell anyone.”

Steve’s grip on his arm tightens just slightly, but it’s enough to let Jonathan know he was right in his suspicions.

Steve feels ashamed that he has to ask Jonathan to do this, Jonathan knows. He’s ashamed of being scared, and he’s ashamed that he felt the need to make sure Jonathan will keep it a secret. He trusts Jonathan - he wouldn’t have told him if he didn’t - but there’s just a part of him that’s so terrified of what others think, a part of him that he can’t tamp down on and claw past no matter how hard he tries.

Jonathan understands. After all, he wasn’t so different a few years ago, before he taught himself not to care.

“Hey,” Jonathan says, and Steve finally relents in his iron-tight grip, though the hard lines around his eyes don’t ease. “I get it, okay? I won’t tell anyone. I promise.”

Steve’s expression softens then, anxiety quelled at least for the moment. And he pulls his mouth upward into something like a smile, so Jonathan considers it a success.

“Thanks,” Steve says - breathes really - relief palpable in his tone.

“Any time,” Jonathan replies.

He doesn’t need to ask in return. He knows Steve won’t tell.

Notes for the Chapter:

I took a lot of liberties re: album track lists. Please don't come for my ass.